

Alexandria's Treasure

Josh1013

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This story was first published on November 22nd, 2019, and was last updated on April 2nd, 2023.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/loveqzro/50000E5S

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Summary

title Alexandria's Treasure
author Josh1013
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13437813/>
published November 22nd, 2019
updated April 2nd, 2023
words 57,340
chapters 20
status Complete
rating Fiction T
A. Steiner, Adventure, Complete, Fanfiction, Final
tags Fantasy IX, Freya C., Games, Garnet A., Zidane T.,
Zidane T. & Garnet A.

Description:

Life isn't a fairy-tail, and Zidane has learned that the hard way. But, that doesn't mean he's going to give up either. To what lengths will Zidane go to be with the woman he loves? He knows it won't be easy, but then what has he got to lose? This story takes place before and directly after the final battle.

1. Prologue(Revised)

It was late, the sun had long since set as the group camped near Maiden Sari. Garnet and Eiko had wanted to visit the Eidolon Wall one last time before the final fight that surely awaited them in Memoria. Zidane had hoped that it would be a lighthearted visit and a nice break compared to the heaviness of what they still had to face. For him, it wasn't just that they might not make it back from Memoria, it was more along the lines of what if they did? What then?

The group had arrived at the ruined city early that morning thanks to the speed of the Invincible, and Zidane would have been lying if he'd said that he hadn't hoped to spend some time alone with a certain dark-haired princess. But, after seeing the serious expression she carried as she walked past him through the destroyed city toward the carved wall that held many painful truths of her heritage, he had decided that it just wasn't the time. Being supportive was one thing, but sometimes people just needed to be alone. He reasoned as he made his way to the small weather worn dock that he and Garnet had shared a conversation what felt like so long ago.

“The Betrothed... What the hell was I thinking?” Zidane muttered to himself and picked up a small piece of broken stone, tossing it out into the water. “I just want to get this done with and then I can...” He trailed off and looked out over the broken railing above him toward the direction of the Eidolon Wall where the others were. “Do what?” he finished lamely. Everyone else had bright futures to look forward to if they could beat Kuja, but what did he have to look forward to? *I’m not even human...* He slid down to sit against the edge of the stone touching the dock. Almost in a daze he stared off across the water, losing track of time and not bothering to go check on the others. There was little doubt that they were fine. Grimly, he supposed that wasn’t really the truth. Hell, Dagger probably needed to be comforted now more than ever. But he hadn’t felt very talkative since what they had found out in Terra, to say the least.

It wasn’t just the fact that he had been created by Garland to be his Angel of Death, though that fact alone would have been enough for most. It was more along the line of what he had taken away from him. The thought of one day finding family, or at least people like him, had always been something that brought him purpose and motivated him to keep

pushing when he felt like giving up. No matter what new place he traveled to, that hope had always stuck with him and he had been sure he would finally have answers when they made it to Terra. He had gotten his answers alright... And even as the group made their way to a nearby clearing to set up camp instead of sleeping amongst the ruins, they had tormented him but he refused to let the others see it.

When he had first found out he had wanted to give up, call it quits, but it had been Dagger that had finally pulled him from his darkened state. It was with her that his thoughts now dwelt as he watched her sleeping fitfully on the other side of their small camp. She and most of the others had gone to sleep a couple of hours ago, but sleep was the last thing on his mind when he had volunteered to keep the first watch of the night. He was supposed to wake up Steiner right about now, an act that should have pleased him greatly, but he figured he'd just let the man sleep instead.

It was still hard to believe sometimes that Steiner would actually sleep while he kept watch. For so long the man had refused to let him take watch on his own. It wasn't out of niceness, he knew; it was because he didn't trust a lowlife thief to protect the princess. As much as Zidane wanted to, he could no

longer begrudge the knight for the way he had felt toward him which made it that much harder to understand why he trusted him now. At worst, he was a killer, meant to be a destroyer of worlds. At best, he was a low life thief and that's what it had always come down to, wasn't it?

Dagger, no it would soon be her majesty Queen Garnet, was royalty. She was meant to be with someone of "high status"; a noble or a prince maybe? She was supposed to be with someone that had all the right table manners. Someone that knew all the fancy words and had studied under the most brilliant scholars. Someone that dressed in those nice suits that probably cost more than he would make in a lifetime. What chance had he ever thought he could have had with a woman like her? She was incredibly smart, wondrously beautiful, funny when she wanted to be, serious when she needed to be. Gods, her voice was like an angel and she had the kindness to match. Not that she didn't have a temper and a hardheaded stubbornness at times, but that just made her even better didn't it?

Damn. He knew he had fallen hard. Too hard. It wasn't like him to get stuck on one girl. Hell, most of the relationships he had had in the past, if you could call them that, had lasted maybe a week at the

most but no matter how hard he tried, and despite what blank would swear, he really had tried to forget about her before Alexandria had been destroyed. But, trying to forget her had only made him think about her even more. She simply wasn't like any other girl he had ever met. He'd be lying if he said his interest in her hadn't been almost entirely carnal in the beginning, especially the way that damn jumpsuit accented every curve, but gods how fast that had changed!

Even now as he sat silently and watched her sleep, he held none of the dirty thoughts that had filled his dreams on more than one occasion and had left him with little choice but to "take care of the problem" the old fashioned way. Instead, he would've loved nothing more than for her to wake up and sit by the fire with him so that he could listen to what she now referred to as her "boring castle stories". He almost chuckled thinking about how much she had changed since the start of their journey. Though he was sure she would never admit it, she too had thought of him as just a common thief at first. She had been so clever and yet so inexperienced with things that had always come to him easily.

He still remembered her surprise, and Steiner's distaste, when he had first cooked a mu that he had hunted and cleaned for them. Steiner had of course wanted to make sure he didn't poison anything, but to his own surprise she had started eating the meat quietly despite his protests. Being a noble, he imagined that was probably the first time she had ever eaten without the proper utensils, but even without them, she had still managed it gracefully. It wasn't until she asked what they were to drink that he got the reaction he had initially expected.

"I can't drink out of a stream!" Garnet protested as she walked toward the edge of a small stream near the Evil Forest.

"Why not? It's crystal clear." He argued, squatting down near the water's edge.

Garnet had visibly paled as she gazed into the water. She promptly stepped backwards with a resolute shake of her head. "What if some animal upstream.."

"Aw, come on, it's fine! I promise." Zidane persuaded, dipping the small pot they always carried below the surface. "If it'll help u feel better, we'll boil it over the fire first so there can't be any germs in it."

“If you say so...” She replied, still looking unsure. “are you sure there’s no other way to get fresh water?”

“You just gotta trust me..”

Zidane shook his head to clear the memory but couldn't hold back a small grin. How he had slowly but surely corrupted her! Now she was often the one to go collect the water, which was sometimes closer to being mud than fresh water. She had even insisted on joining him during quite a few of his hunts, only becoming squeamish when he had begun to clean the animal. *She's really become something else.* He thought, for not the first time that night. I'd like for those pompous nobles to see her now. But, they would see her. Once this was over, she'd go back to Alexandria to rebuild and the Dagger he knew, the Dagger he had fallen hopelessly in love with, would be forever out of his reach. If he were lucky and tried hard enough, he might be able to see her atop her balcony once the castle was restored. If he squinted hard enough that is.

The truth was exactly what Steiner had insisted on telling him for most of their journey; she was royalty, and he was just a lowlife thief. Now he couldn't even claim to be that, he wasn't even

human after all. What kind of person had he thought he could become? or rather, what kind of life had he expected? Dagger, or Her Majesty as he needed to get used to if he could bring himself to go see her, was destined for great things, but what about him? It was an endless circle, with no positive answer in sight. *When this is all over maybe I should become a mercenary for hire or just try to stay out of everyone's way? Kingdom's hired mercenaries all the time, maybe then I would at least get to talk to Dagger occasionally.* He let out a heavy sigh. Thinking had never been his strong suit.

Trying to push the cloud of thoughts from his mind, he carefully placed more branches onto the small fire and watched as the flames slowly grew, but as he stared into the fire his mind went back again to the one place he kept trying so desperately to avoid: He pictured Dagger on her wedding day. She'd be wearing a beautiful white dress, fitting her perfectly and contouring every curve. She'd be coming toward the alter, smiling at the man she'd spend the rest of her life with, but it wouldn't be him. It would probably be some rich snob from Treno! His tail thrashed against the ground angrily as he threw the last stick into the fire sending small sparks scattering. Why couldn't he have been born a

noble? If he had had his own kingdom or wealthy estate, they wouldn't laugh and throw him out if he came to propose to her...

...

"You were supposed to wake me up hours ago." A stern voice came from behind him, though it held no anger or bitterness. Zidane shrugged dismissively, not too surprised that the man had eventually woken on his own. He was surprised however, that the clanking of Steiner's armor didn't wake the others up as he joined him to sit on the log by the fire.

A long silence filled the air as both men stared into the fire and that was more than fine by him. He no longer held any grudges against the man, but at the same time he didn't really feel like starting a conversation at the moment either..

"Something on your mind?" Steiner asked finally, in a low gravelly voice.

"Nah. I'm okay." He lied, not taking his eyes from the flames.

"Well, you haven't been yourself lately. I think the princess is beginning to worry." Steiner prodded, turning towards him and sounding uncomfortable.

“Does it matter?” He spat defensively.

Steiner returned to staring at the fire for a while before replying. “Is it because of what you discovered on Terra? We cannot change those facts, but for what it is worth we do not see you any differently.”

“Yea, I know.” He scoffed.

“Then what is the problem? I do not understand, if that is not it that what is it?” Steiner replied in exasperation.

He did not turn from the fire and replied in almost a whisper. “You wouldn’t understand.”

He expected Steiner to growl in frustration or at least leave him alone for the night, but the man did neither. “Perhaps not... I know that we often do not see eye to eye, but I will endeavor to try.”

He turned to Steiner in surprise. “Can I ask you something and you be completely honest?”

“Of course.” He answered with a slight air of hesitation.

“What are the odds that a lowly commoner could ever be with a princess?” he asked.

Steiner let out a heavy sigh. So, that was what was troubling him. “I assume you mean you?”

He didn’t answer.

“Despite what I originally thought of you, you have proven to be both honorable and trustworthy. I think you would be a fine choice for her Highness... but as for the people...” Steiner trailed off not wanting to hurt him further.

“That’s sort of what I thought.” He replied tonelessly, having understood where the knight was going with it. “It wouldn’t matter what I did or how hard I tried, in everyone else’s eyes I’d still just be a common thief.” To this, Steiner said nothing. What could he say?

After what felt like an hour had passed, he spoke again. “If I somehow became a prince or a king do you think things could be different?”

Steiner shook his head. “We can desire to be many things, but they are not always possible.”

Zidane stood up and stared toward the stars then turned his gaze to Dagger who was still sleeping. “After this is over, after we beat Kuja, I’m gonna leave. As much as I’d love to always be with her, life isn’t a fairytale. The lowly thief doesn’t get the

princess. I'll do my best to slip off quietly. Just.. tell her that I ran off with another woman; that it's just the kind of person I am. It'll hurt her less that way and she'll eventually forget about me." He walked toward his travel worn cot and began to lie down.

"Given the choice and chance. would you truly become a prince and deal in politics just for the princess?" There was a tone in Steiner's voice he wasn't sure he had heard before.

"If I could, I'd be anything she needed me to be... G'night Rusty." He turned over in his cot and let sleep claim him.

Steiner pondered the thief's words even after the battle was over and the airship flew toward Alexandria leaving Zidane to try to save the same man they had worked so hard to defeat. It was not the departure either of them had expected, but he could honestly say that he hoped it wasn't the last time he saw that particular thief.

2. Recovery

When he awoke, his head was pounding far worse than any headache or hangover he'd ever had in his life. He opened his eyes, but shut them again quickly with a groan as he felt the burn from the bright white light above him. That light wasn't the sun; not unless he had hit his head hard enough to forget what that looked like. But, that didn't seem likely. Images of running down the roots of the Lifa Tree, finding Kuja almost lifeless, and most of all saying goodbye to Dagger and the others flashed quickly through his mind. With them, came the sting of regret.

He had planned on leaving anyway, but why had it been so painful? He had wanted to slip away quietly, instead he had done the opposite. Had leaving been honorable? It didn't feel like it; he felt like a coward. He hadn't even been able to look at Dagger as she flew away and out of his life.

"You are awake." A feminine voice spoke with only traces of mild excitement. For a short moment he had hoped it was Dagger, but he knew her voice far too well for that to be the case. "Mikoto?" He

croaked hoarsely. Gods he was thirsty, how long had he been out?

“Yes brother, I have been taking care of you the best that I can.” She answered matter-of-factly. He heard the shuffle of her feet as she walked to his side.”

“How... how long?” he managed to groan.

“You have been unconscious for three months and four days.”

“....”

Three months? How had he been—

I managed to figure out the workings of the life support system onboard the Invincible. It wasn't too difficult, as I had been on this ship a few times before. I have not yet told the others that I found you. I didn't know if you would recover with your many injuries. You had twelve broken bones, seventeen fractures, a punctured lung and a severe concussion. Now that you are awake, I will let your friends know.”

He opened his eyes quickly, despite the pain, and grabbed her arm as she began to walk away. “No!”

he breathed. Damn that had taken more effort than it should have.

She turned back toward him with a look of puzzlement across her face. “I do not understand.”

He tried to sit up, but found himself failing miserably. To his relief, she grabbed him and helped push him to a sitting position. Surprisingly, that didn’t hurt. But godsdamn if he wasn’t weak!”

“Wa... wuu” he tried to say water but it came out as a dry croak. Thankfully she understood and moments later brought a glass of water to his mouth which he drank greedily, spilling some of it down his chin. It amazed him slightly just how much better he instantly felt from one glass of water. ‘I mixed a bit of Elixer into the water.’ She offered, as if reading his thoughts. “Why do you not want me to tell them, Brother? Are they not your friends?”

“They are. I just... Don’t tell anyone for now, okay?” He knew he couldn’t stop her if she intended to, but if she did, what would he say to them? He didn’t want them to welcome him back just for him to tell them that he couldn’t stay. Before the final battle he had seen the way Dagger looked at him, and as much as his heart had soared at the look of love in her eyes and the connection they had shared

that couldn't have just been between friends, it had hurt just as much. He had heard the sadness in her voice when they had said their goodbyes. It could've just been because he was leaving, but he felt that she knew, a part of her anyway, that even if he came back things could never be the way they had been those last few months.

"I understand." She answered, though her face might have told otherwise. "If they ask, I will... lie. Is that the correct term for when you do not speak in facts?"

He chuckled lightly at this. "Yea, that's pretty much it. Thanks, Miko."

She turned to him with a mixture of confusion and concern. "My name isn't Miko. You know that it is Mikoto; is your head not healed? The scans showed that—"

"Woah, I'm fine! It's a just a nickname!" He exclaimed, afraid she might subject him to more treatments, whatever those had been.

Her concern faded away, leaving only blank confusion. "A nickname?"

"Yea, it's a special name that friends or family sometimes give each other." He replied with a laugh,

stretching his muscles that had been dormant for far too long.

Mikoto smiled warmly at that. “Family.”

He nodded and pushed himself off the bed, intending to stand. Instead, all he managed to do was fall limply to the floor as his legs refused to support his weight. “Ugh..” he groaned. That was embarrassing..

“You will have to take it slowly, your body is not longer used to being mobile.” She studied him for a moment, but thankfully he heard no laughter in her voice. “It may take quite a while..”

....

“Quite a while” ended up being almost three months. The first few weeks were spent just building his strength up enough to stand. Having finally conquered that, he’d rather not admit how long it had actually taken him to take the first step. Had learning to walk as a child been so difficult? His headache had eased to almost non-existence around that time as well. By a month, he was walking normally but didn’t dare attempt running or jumping.

During that time, he found joy in Mikoto's company. The other Genomes no longer seemed to be anywhere near lifeless, but rather had taken on almost childlike qualities. He was saddened to see however, that already three of the black mages had "stopped" as they called it. But, it didn't matter how you dressed it up, the fact was all of them were dying. It was only a matter of time until... but they didn't seem to be letting it get them down. They went on about their lives trying to enjoy even the smallest moments that each day brought. He supposed there was a lesson to be learned there.

He had expected, and hoped, that his dear friend Vivi would soon arrive, but in those months of recovered there had been no sign of the young mage, nor had anyone else stopped either. Who was he kidding? They probably hadn't even looked for him. Kingdoms didn't send out an entire airship crew just to find one commoner, let alone a thief. Hell, could he even be called that anymore? If he could, he had likely become one of the worst thieves in Gaia. When was the last time he had successfully stolen anything?

He had been walking by the creek in the Black Mage Village, and as this thought crossed his mind, he stopped and stared into the clear water. He barely

recognized the person staring back at him. His face had regained its color from the last time he had looked. His hair was no longer dirty and his eyes no longer looked pale grey. Piercing blue eyes now stared back at him. What surprised him the most however, was that there was a light stubble of hair on his chin and the sides of his face. “Shouldn’t I be starting to look more like Kuja?” he asked to no one in particular.

“No, because you were created differently.” Mikoto answered, as she walk up from behind him. He turned to her and saw that she was struggling to carry a basket of freshly picked apples. He began to offer to carry them for her, but she shook her head. “I don’t wish to pick them up again.”

He sighed in defeat, feeling useless. “How do you mean different? He asked, struggling to keep up with her quick pace as she carried the apples to the small market.

“You and I were modeled to be more... Human. Unlike the other Genomes, you and I will age and show other characteristics that humans possess, such as full life spans and the ability to reproduce. The others will not age but eventually just.. stop. I have yet to figure out a way to change that for them.

“If there’s anyone that can find a way, it’s you, Miko.” He offered, trying to cheer up the suddenly sullen girl. His thoughts were on the other genomes, and so he barely registered the relief at not looking like Kuja. Though he had no plans of “reproducing” anytime soon.

“Would u like an apple?” She asked suddenly, the seriousness of her previous thought apparently forgotten. “The trees here are very bountiful. They will help you recover your strength and though it is not very scientific, I find them to be very delicious.”

He chuckled at her words and accepted one of the apples. “Thank you.” He smiled still slightly out of breath. “How much longer do you think it will be before I’m back to normal?”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “If by normal you mean until your strength is fully recovered, then it depends. I believe recovery is deferent for everyone. Maybe a few more weeks.”

“Oh.” He replied simply. He enjoyed the village, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t want to go somewhere else.

“Have you decided what you will do when you have fully recovered?” She asked.

“Uh.. haven’t really thought about it.” He lied. Truth was, he had been thinking about very little else. His dreams had constantly been filled with Alexandria and a certain raven haired woman that dwelt there. Had she found someone else already? Did she even—

“Perhaps you should find a hobby. I find reading to be pleasurable.” She commented knowingly.

Him read?

....

A few days later, he found himself standing in the meager library that the black mages had constructed. It had many books that they had undoubtedly thought would be helpful, such as cookbooks, books concerning herbs and medicine, and even basic homebuilding. He skimmed though, finding nothing that peaked his interest until his gaze landed on a small section of Avon’s poems, a fictional book called “The Last Cherry Blossom” and finally to a book at the end titled “Of Kings and Kingdoms”. He pulled it carefully from the shelf, its bindings looked far older than any of the other books. He wondered vaguely where the mages had found a book so old, but didn’t dwell on it as he opened the book to a random page somewhere near the middle and began

to read what he decided was meant to be a letter to someone.

Dear friend, I have not heard from you in three seasons but I hope these words find you and find you well. I wanted you to know that I took your advice, but I believe I have gone as far as I can go. I have naught left to give. My family, all of the people I have ever truly cared about have abandoned me or are dead. Have you too forsaken me? I told you many times before I ascended to the throne that I was not worthy of such a seat.

I have ruled this kingdom the only way that I know how. I have been hailed as a great ruler in these times of war, but what would they think of me if they knew that it was you, not I, that was meant to be king? Would they cast me aside or into the fire if they knew not a single drop of Noble blood ran through my veins? Sometimes I wonder..

I don't suppose it matters now; my life nears its end. I grow more weary with each passing hour. I dare not sleep however, for I fear that when I do, I will sleep the sleep of the dead. I have many regrets in my life, but it was never this. I do not hold any bitterness for this life, if my rule helped even one individual... then I shall die peacefully. I ask of you

only that you forgive any of my shortcomings, for they are many, and that you find peace in knowing that I have lived a full life and none of the blame is yours to bear.

With love, Edgar

He closed the book with a frown and gently placed it back on the shelf. So, the man hadn't been born a king? He started to reach for the book again, but stopped and instead walked out of the library.

....

“So, have you decided where you will go?” Mikoto asked as Zidane walked in, out of breath from his morning run. “You may not be quite as fast as before you were injured, and may not ever be, but I would say that you have recovered well.” She commented, with a hint of sadness in her voice.

“I have to go back.” He breathed. “I may not have a chance at being with her, but I have to at least talk to her one last time.”

She turned from him and walked to one of the contraptions she had been tinkering with not meeting his gaze. “So, you are leaving today then?”

Even though she had said almost nothing against him leaving, he knew his younger sister wished that he would stay. He walked over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Hey, you know we’ll see each other again soon.” He said cheerfully.

She looked at him skeptically and did not return his smile. “I know that you are leaving with the three black mages that are teleporting to Treno, will you be returning with them as well?”

“Well no, but—”

“Then it is unlikely you will return anytime in the near future.”

She was right, if things went the way he hoped, it would be long while. However, he hated seeing her sad, though in truth she still showed little emotion. “Look, I WILL be back, till then I’ll send lend letters as often as I can, just so you know I haven’t forgotten about you.”

She did brighten visibly at this. “I enjoy reading. You had better tell me about the places you go.”

“Of course.” He laugh.

“Well you better hurry. They will be leaving any moment.” She warned, motioning to the black

images that were gathering magical energy outside.

To her surprise, he hugged her tightly then.
“Goodbye, Miko. Thanks for everything!”

She shook her head as he hurried toward the door.
“Zidane!” she called.

He stopped abruptly and turned toward her.
“Yea?”

“Don’t forget your book that you were reading.”
She replied knowingly, looking to the table beside the door. He nodded somberly, then picked up the book. Moments later, he was gone.

“Good luck, Zid.” Mikoto whispered quietly.
“Finding that book wasn’t easy, but maybe it was worth it.”

...

Thanks to everyone who took the time to leave a review on the prologue and all of my silent readers who have continued to read my fic! I hope you enjoyed chapter 1!

3. The Dark Truth

A/n: I didn't intend to finish this chapter so quickly, but apparently I cant stop writing lol as I said before, i wanted this story to be completely different from Underworld, but I couldn't help myself from adding a short guest appearance lol I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

I should probably add that this is where the fic will begin to turn quite a bit darker; hopefully not enough to lose your interest. Either way, please leave me your thoughts!

.....

Breathing heavily, Zidane struggled to his knees and pulled his dagger from the man's chest. Blood pooled out from the lifeless body, staining the concrete walkway. His head reeled and he fought back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. Distantly, as if in a daze, he heard the woman screaming in fear. He turned in the direction of her voice and saw soldiers running toward him. With a shaking hand, he pushed himself to his feet and ran.

...

A few hours earlier..

“It feels like forever since I’ve been here.” Zidane commented wondrously as he walked through the gates of the city. The three mages had agreed to stay on the outskirts of the city after he had volunteered to get the items they needed. They gave him quite a large amount of Gil considering the mages very rarely dealt with money. They were seeking various potions and herbs that weren’t readily available on the outer continent, and if he had to guess, he’d say that where probably for another of Mikoto’s attempts to extend their short lifespans.

He didn’t know if it would be any more successful than any of the other attempts, but he had grown to care deeply for the black mages and he had no intention of being the one to crush their hopes. He just hoped he was able to find everything on the list..

He was fairly well known in Lindblum, so as he walked toward the market in the poorer section of Treno, he did his best to keep his head down and his tail wrapped around his waist so as to hopefully not attract too much unwanted attention. It didn’t seem to be a problem though, as he made it all the way to

the item shop without anyone even seeming to notice him. Had he truly changed so much?

The last time he was here he had barely walked a few feet past the entrance when a girl he had flirted with on more than one occasion had blown him a kiss and given him a flirtatious wink, which he returned, before sauntering off. He had felt flattered of course, and a sense of satisfaction, up until he had broken his gaze from her and noticed Dagger stomping off angrily. She didn't talk to him for the rest of the day. Even the next morning, when she finally did, her words had been icy toward him and it had taken more than a little effort to win back her graces. He hadn't found flirting to be nearly as easy or enjoyable after that.

Shaking his head to clear the thoughts of the raven haired woman that always seemed more than willing to fill his mind, he walked up to the item shop and handed the woman at the counter his list. She looked at him skeptically for a moment, then began retrieving an assortment of small vials and bottles from the shelves behind her. He waited patiently for a few moments until she placed what he assumed to be most of the items in front of him. "I have almost everything on your list, except for the devil grass and the elixirs. She gave him a knowing

look that he didn't quite understand." I believe there may be a few nobles in town that have the devil grass, but it's a toss up where you might find the elixir. Those are very difficult to come by, especially a large bottle. "She offered.

He sighed. Of course it wasn't going to be easy. "Any idea which noble might have the devil grass?"

She shook her head apologetically though he had a sense there was something she wasn't telling him. "You might try the pub, you'd be surprised how many nobles spend their time there drowning themselves in a bottle."

He chuckled at this. I guess having all the money you could want wasn't enough to make them happy. He thanked her, then paid her what she requested, noting again with dismay that that left him with previous little Gil, nowhere near enough to buy an Elixir if he were lucky enough to find one. But, he was a thief after all, so if there was even a possibility that it would help the mages, he would just do what he had to do.

Before heading to the pub, he thought it best to carry the supplies back to the mages. He wouldn't be doing any sneaking or running if he had to carry a box of fragile items the entire time. He didn't bother

trying to keep his head down this time, and was still only noticed by two kids that pointed at him and said something to each other. Unfortunately, they spoke too quietly for him to be able to hear what they were saying.

When he arrived back at the entrance to the city, the mages thanked him happily for the supplies, and he assured them that he would try to hurry to get the rest, though they did not seem to be too impatient as they looked around incredulously at the lights of the city, as a child might gaze upon a place that was unfamiliar to them but also held a magical sense of wonder. He truly hoped that Mikoto would soon be successful.

...

He pushed open the door to the pub and was surprised that there was a crowd inside. Maybe the reason there weren't many people in the streets was because they were all here? For the life of him, he couldn't remember the place ever being this crowded; finding the one person that had what he needed wasn't going to be easy. His first inclination was to go around asking random people till he found what he was looking for, but if he was planning on stealing it, that would be incredibly stupid. With

resignation, he decided he would go sit at the bar and think about his options.

After pushing his way through the crowd, he noticed there was one empty stool. Seated next to it was a man with short brown hair in a black outfit and armor unlike any he'd seen in his travels. There was a sword on his back, but no one seemed to be paying him any mind as he sipped on a tall glass of whisky. As he sat down, he noticed that there was a blond haired woman seated next to the man that was dressed in a similar fashion and was staring at the untouched glass in front of her as if deep in thought or turmoil.

“See something that sparks your interest?” The man asked with an amused chuckle.

Zidane flushed a little at having been caught looking at the woman, though it hadn't been out of lust. “Uh.. Sorry. Is she your..”

“No.” He replied simply, seemingly expecting by his question. “She is my companion; dare I say friend?”

“Oh.” Zidane commented lamely and scratched the back of his head. “No offense, but judging by your outfits, you must not be from around here.”

“I guess you could say we are... travelers, though we have no intention of staying here very long.” The man commented, turning back to his drink. From the corner of his eye he noticed the blond-haired woman staring at him. He could have sworn he had seen a deep longing in her eyes, but when he turned toward her to say something she quickly turned away and began to drink greedily from her mug.

“Judging by the way you walked in here and the fact that you haven’t ordered anything, I think it’s safe to say you’re not here for a drink.” The man commented knowingly. “And I don’t think it’s company, either.”

Damn, was he that easy to read? “No, to be honest I’m looking for an Elixir and Devil Grass.”

The man grinned. “It just so happens I might can help you with both, If you’re willing to do something for us that is.”

He wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that, but what choice did he have? “Alright.. What do you want me to do?”

“I thought you might say that.” The man replied, all traces of the amusement in his voice was gone.

“Do you see the extravagantly dressed man in the far corner?”

He turned, and found that it was hard to miss the large man that was sitting at a table of other nobles, laughing loudly, no doubt fueled by his drunkenness.

“His name is Burtrard. He is the wealthiest man in Treno, perhaps the most revered. But, he is also the most conniving and cynical. In short, I think you will find that he is a very evil man deserving of the death that you will carry out.”

“What!?” Zidane Exclaimed, causing a few people to turn in his direction. Swallowing nervously, he turned back to the man at the counter. “You expect me to kill him just for an elixir?” he whispered harshly.

The man stood up and slapped a handful of gil on the table. He then turned to the woman who now looked more than a little tipsy. “It is time for us to go. Are you alright?” She glanced at Zidane sadly for a moment before nodding. The man then reached into a pouch at his side and pulled out a bottle of purple liquid and sat it down heavily on the bar before turning back to Zidane. “I will give you this Elixir freely. As for the man.. Go listen to his words and choose his fate for yourself, but know this, there

are those that make the world a better place by living, but there are also those that could ever only make the world a better place by dying. When you are done, whatever you decide, he keeps a black stone inside his left jacket pocket. I need you to destroy that stone. That is what I ask.”

He picked up the bottle and watched as the man helped the blond-haired woman to her feet. There was still something about her he couldn’t quite place. As they started walking away, he called after them. “Hey, Thank you.. and don’t worry, I’ll destroy it.”

The man snickered as the pair took another step. “I know you will, Tribal.”

Wait. How did they know his name? “Who are you?’ He asked to their retreating forms.

The man stopped once more. “Names aren’t important. What IS important is that the man I showed you has plenty of the other item you seek. Farewell, may we meet again in another life.” With that, the pair rounded a corner and was gone. Neither of whom were ever seen again.

...

Why had the man who had given him the elixir seemed so sure that he would kill the obnoxious noble in the corner? He chose not to get up from his seat at the bar and tried to watch the man for a few moments. Sure he was the epitome of every noble he had ever disliked, the kind that would eagerly flaunt their money while people starved to death at his feet, but did he deserve to die? Let alone be killed by his own hands?

He looked down at his hands thoughtfully. He had promised he would destroy the black stone, whatever it was, and he would. But, surely he could do that by just pickpocketing him when he was distracted. It seemed he and the other nobles were having a conversation, but to his aggravation, he couldn't make out any of it. He still knew very little about this "Burtrard" and his apparent friends, but what would it hurt for him to get close enough to hear? After all, there was an empty bench not far from where they were sitting..

He moved through the crowd, being careful not to attract attention to himself and was thankful that his thieving skills still came in handy from time to time. He still wasn't sure if this was a great idea, but even before he managed to sit on the bench a single word caught his full attention and it had nothing to

do with why had come to the pub in the first place. That word.. was Garnet.

He tried his best not to let his surprise and interest show as he quickly sat down and tried to drown out the rest of the crowd. After only a few moments of listening, his surprise turned to anger.

“That stupid bitch doesn’t even have royal blood!” Burtrard spat.

“She is nothing more than a commoner.” One of the women at the table voiced in agreement, a few others nodded.

“Does she truly think that she can achieve world peace, when her own kingdom is in shambles?” Another asked as she fanned herself.

“I hear it was her fault the kingdom was destroyed in the first place!” A little bookish man seated across from Bertrard added.

As Zidane listened, a part of him wanted to scream that she had done everything she could do, that she had almost died trying to stop it. So what if she wasn’t the original Garnet? No one cared about Alexandria more than she did! Instead of voicing these thoughts, he forced himself to keep listening.

“From the way you talked earlier, Lord Burtrard, I do not believe she will be a problem much longer..”

“You heard correctly.” Burtrard replied with a dark grin. “Her Majesty will soon be seeing her dear mother.”

Zidane almost jumped at this; he felt as though he had been stung.

“How?” one of the women whispered eagerly.

Burtrard took another drink from his wine before replying. “Devil’s grass. All it takes is one dose and the deed will be done.”

Zidane felt his heart racing, threatening to pound out of his chest. So, that’s what devil grass was! He had assumed it was just a herb, it had never crossed his mind that it could be poison! What if someone had already given it to her!?

“When?” The third woman asked seductively.

Burtrard smiled smugly at her, “It could be as soon as tomorrow. I need only to give the order.”

So, there was still time...

“Once she’s gone they will have no choice but to let you take the throne! With your money, you can simply buy anyone that opposes you!” She returned with a laugh.

“With you as my queen!” He laughed happily, grabbing her hand and lifting it in the air.

The bookish man was the only one among them that seemed to be nervous. “Should we be talking about this out in the open?” He asked cautiously. Burtrard’s smile fell a notch as he glared at the man. “I-I mean there guards drinking nearby..”

Burtrard broke out into a loud obnoxiously boisterous laugh and followed it with an even darker smile that made Zidane cringe. “Guards!?” He spat disbelieving. “Do you truly believe that the guards will arrest ME, when I am the one that gives them their orders? If I chose one of them to do the deed, do u think they would object to someone of my stature? Not even the regent of Lindblum would dare send troops to oppose me! I own lands in EVERY city!”

There was silence for a few moments following his speech by everyone else at the table, but after another round of his laughter, all of the others returned to their high spirits. It made Zidane sick to

his stomach as he hurried out of the pub, nearly shoving people out of his way. He felt tears of anger and sadness burning his eyes as he pushed into the night air. He grabbed onto a nearby railing, afraid he might fall under the weight of what he had just heard. They were going to kill her! Even though he hadn't seen her, he was sure she was doing the best she could and would never do anything to hurt anyone! How could someone be willing to kill an amazing woman like her!?

The answer, however, was painfully clear; even if it was hard to swallow. If they had their way, they would kill her simply so that they could take her throne... He couldn't let that happen. Dagger was strong, but how would she be able to defend herself against an enemy she couldn't see? As he stared down into the water below the railing, he realized that the strange man at the bar had been right... He was going to kill Burtrard. What choice did he have? Men like that couldn't be reasoned with, and if he tried to tell the guards, who was to say that he wouldn't be the one ending up behind bars?

His hands felt sweaty as he nodded to himself with grim resolve. He didn't like what he had to do, but once the man left the bar he would either follow him home or wait till the man was on a secluded

walkway and then.. he would put Burtrard's plans to rest.

He didn't have to wait long as moments later the man in question came walking confidently out of the bar. Looking at him, there was hardly any signs that the man had even been drinking at all. If there was one thing he had to give nobles credit for, it was that pretty much all of them knew how to handle their drink. Making sure that Burtrard was far enough away so that he wouldn't be noticed and yet close enough to keep up with, he followed.

Despite that killing the man was something he would have desperately wished he didn't have to do, at least it seemed as though it would be easy as the man headed for the dimly lit alley. Just as he began to pull out his dagger, however, is when his plan took a turn that he had hoped wouldn't happen. There was a soldier standing in wait at the beginning of the alleyway, and he turned just in time to see Burtrard give him what had to be the devil grass.

"Godsdammit!" he breathed quietly as the guard began to walk away opposite the direction of Burtrard, a smug look of satisfaction shown across both men's faces. Now he would have to stop that guard! But Burtrard could— cutting his thoughts

short, it was time to stop being subtle and take action! He made sure Burtrard wasn't watching, then set off at a run after the guard intending to tackle him to the ground and wrench the poison away from the would be assassin. He had dealt with these guards before, and he was sure the man would put up little challenge, if any.

That too didn't go the way he had expected. As soon as he drew near, the guard whipped around with a dagger of his own already drawn. Zidane skidded to a stop and pulled his dagger from its sheath. "Boss told me there might be people that would try to stop me, but I gotta say I didn't expect one of you so soon."

"Give me that poison!" Zidane growled. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will if it means saving Dagger!"

"Dagger?" the guard laughed. "That's what you call the soon to be late queen? You must be one of her worthless friends she traveled with."

"Give. Me. The poison." Zidane repeated, growing angrier by the moment.

"You'll have to kill me for it." The guard replied smugly. With that, the guard lunged for him with his

blade. Zidane recoiled, narrowly missing the sting of its edge. This guy was fast! There was no way he was just a normal guard! The man swung again and this time he met steel with steel. “Not bad.” The guard chuckled. Zidane pushed him back, and felt that slight sense of weakness he had grown accustomed to over the last few months. He had lied to Mikoto, he still wasn’t completely well, but he hadn’t expected to have to fight anyone either. He would have to finish this quickly.

After parrying another of the guard’s attacks, he countered with an attack of his own, slicing into the man’s arm. The guard let out a pained grunt and punched him in the ribs with his other arm. Zidane coughed and quickly tried to catch his breath. As soon as the guard had hit him though, he had turned around and begun to flee. With little choice, he gave chase.

Zidane cursed his weakness as he struggled to gain any distance on the man he was pursuing. It was almost halfway across the city and in the heart of the “Rich” sector that he finally got a break as the guard stumbled and collided with a snobby looking woman in a yellow and dress. Knowing that he would probably regret what would happen afterword, he leapt onto the man. To his dismay,

even with his weight crashing down on him, the man somehow managed to pull his dagger free again and the two began to wrestle over control of the blade.

The guard was much stronger than he had expected, and he struggled to keep the tip from pushing into his throat. With a yell of desperation and anger, he shoved with everything he had and in the next instant the knife was buried deep in the guards chest. He began to cough up blood and no longer struggled. Zidane met his pained gaze with grim remorse. “Do you... think you stopped anything?.. There will.. be others... that..” He died.

Breathing heavily, Zidane struggled to his knees and pulled his dagger from the man’s chest. Blood pooled out from the lifeless body staining the concrete walkway. His head reeled and he fought back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. Distantly, as if in a daze, he heard the woman screaming in fear. He turned in the direction of her voice and saw soldiers running toward him. With a shaking hand, he pushed himself to his feet and ran.

4. Burtrard

Just as he had thought, word of what had happened and who was to blame spread throughout Treno almost instantly. He had been more than fortunate to find a cloak that fit him amongst the wares at a small shop in the poorer district. The people there had not yet heard of what he had done, or simply did not care about anything that happened in the rich sector. Either way he was thankful for them as he now sat against a stone wall near the edge of the city. He had given the mages the last two items that they had needed; and they had thanked him as though he were a hero before teleporting back to the black mage village.

He didn't feel like a hero. What had he accomplished? All he had done was kill one guard that was trying to poison the woman he loved. He loved her. He could say that now to himself as easily as stating the fact that he was still breathing, and gods he missed her. Had she moved on? Had she married some snobby prince that could afford to buy her all the nicest things? His heart sank the more he thought about it. Even though he wanted desperately to hurry to Alexandria and see for himself, there was

still work to be done. He had vowed to protect her, no matter what the cost, and he would be damned if he let someone that tried to kill her get away with it.

He could sit here wondering if he had done the right thing for hours, but the fact was that Burtrard surely had been one of the first to know that his would be assassin was slain, and there was little doubt that he was already planning another way or finding someone else to send to kill her. He had to be stopped, one way or another. He pushed himself to his feet and began walking back toward the rich sector. It was time to find Burtrard.

To his surprise, finding him proved to be incredibly easy. He had expected the man to have gone into hiding after his guard was slain, instead he found him standing in the middle of the square addressing a sizable group of people. He blended in with the crowd and began to listen to the man's speech. "Dear friends! It is sad news that I must share with you this night! Rumors have been spreading that one of our guards, a man with a family and who has served this great city with loyalty for many years, has been slain. I am saddened to say that that rumor is true!"

He didn't like where the man's speech was heading as there was a gasp of fear and disbelief from the audience that had gathered to listen, and he was again thankful for the cloak as none had yet noticed his presence.

"Yes!" Burtrard continued. "A good man has been slain tonight on these very streets! His killer did not care if your safety was endangered! He did not care if peace was broken this night!"

Zidane could feel dread seeping in as the crowd began to grow angry. It was only a matter of time before they would be out for blood.

"I do not believe that this man's murderer was one of you! No, I believe that is what they wanted you to think! Do any of you truly believe that a man such as this loyal guard could be murdered in cold blood by one of our own upstanding citizens?" There was a murmur of agreement amongst the crowd as they considered this. Zidane wondered where he was going with this but was sure it couldn't be good. Despite this, he had to again give the man credit, as he put on a show of remorse worthy of one of Tantalus' plays.

"No! It is with great sadness that I must speak the truth! This may be hard to believe for some of you,

but the assassin was sent by none other than the tyrant queen of Alexandria!

There was another collective gasp from the audience, and it was obvious to Zidane that most if not all of them believed the accusation. The man had showed no proof of anything, and yet the group of people, all of them, looked as though they were ready and willing to go to war. The nobles alone of course wouldn't be any physical threat to Alexandria. But, their combined wealth and resources might be another story altogether. Had he made a horrible mistake killing the guard? No. If he hadn't stopped him, the queen and more importantly, the woman he loved, would have been dead. What difference would anything have made then? He needed to think! Why couldn't he stay calm and think!?

To his dismay, Burtrard continued with his voice elevated as if he had already won some victory, with no longer any trace of his faked sadness. "Yes! She would like you all to believe that she wants nothing but the restoration of Alexandria, but kingdoms are not rebuilt without resources! Do you believe that a queen such as her will find a way to get the resources on her own? No! She will take what she needs from all of you! It will not matter to her if it

leaves you penniless! Twice already, she has abandoned her own people! Do not think that she will give any of you even a passing thought?!”

Zidane growled in frustration and pushed himself forward in the crowd; he had to stop this! If he let Burtrard continue, it could be the start of a war! With Alexandria surely still struggling to recover, there was just no way that they would be able to handle another war so soon, whereas Treno had been one of the least affected placed in Gaia. If anything, they had all but prospered and grown stronger. He began to quietly pull the dagger from his belt as he drew to the front of the crowd but stopped as a young boy surely no older than six with curly brown hair approached Burtrard defensively. “She’s not a Ty Rat! She’s a good queen! My daddy says her and her comp— her friends saved us!”

Burtrard looked at the boy with an equal measure of distaste and disappointment upon noticing his ragged attire and shook his head before attempting to shoo him off. “You poor misguided boy.. Has living in the slums stripped you of your senses or are you simply too young to see the obvious? Either way, run along back to your parents. I would hate for you to further disappoint them with your ill-conceived notions of fairytales.”

Zidane felt pride as the boy balled his fists and stood his ground firmly even as tears began to run down his face. “It’s not a fairytale! We lived in Alexandria before it was destroyed! You’re just a no-good liar!” There were a few chuckles and poorly concealed laughs from the crowd that stood watching the unexpected development, but even those that did not laugh obviously saw the boy only as amusement. He tried his best to bite back his anger for the boy as Burtrard knelt before him wearing a dark grin. “And who might your father be? Is he here among us? Surely u do not wish to continue to make him a fool?”

At this, the boy broke down crying, and instead of answering him, turned and ran toward the alleyway. Zidane did not want to let Burtrard cause any more damage, but that boy was upset from more than just the things that had just been said to him. With a sigh, he released his dagger and made his way after the fleeing boy. Like Burtrard, it did not take long to find him. The boy was sitting on the edge of the walkway, his feet hanging over the side and his head on the railing still crying. Without any introduction, he lowered his hood and sat beside the boy. At first, he said nothing, instead looking up at the night sky thoughtfully. After a few moments he

could hear the boy's sobs subsiding. "Who are you? And why did you follow me?" He asked quietly.

Zidane did not answer, but instead asked a question of his own. "It's your dad isn't it? He was.. Hurt in the attack, wasn't he?" The boy remained silent, but his renewed tears told him everything he needed to know. The boy's father wasn't just hurt in the explosions; he was killed. His mother must have brought him here to try to start a new life. With sadness, placed an arm around the boy's shoulder. "My name's Zidane, what's yours? Everything is gonna be okay."

The boy sniffled a few more times before replying quietly. "I'm Ralph... how is everything gonna be okay without my dad? Mama works so much she doesn't even have time to play with me anymore.."

Zidane turned his gaze back toward the stars. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing that can bring ur dad back, none of you deserved what happened, but sometimes in this life, there's things we can't change. But hey, you do still have your mom, and it may not seem like it right now, but she loves u very much. I'm sure if she could, she'd be spending time with you right now. But sometimes, we have to do

things to look after the people we love, even if it means you can't be with them the way you want to..."

He looked back at Ralph and could see that he was trying to understand. "I guess what I mean is, I know you're hurting and I know that's not gonna go away for a long time, but I'll bet your mom is hurting too and needs you just as much as you need her. If you stick together and you're there for her, she'll be there for you too and you'll get through this." Zidane finished with a smile. Ralph visibly cheered up at his words and thanked him before presumably running off to find his mom.

"But what do you do when the only way to protect the people you love is by becoming someone they'd hate...?"

....

Burtrard was sitting alone in his garden terrace, seemingly without a care in the world as Zidane could see no sign of any guards nearby. How could any man, even one this vile, be so at ease after trying to start another war for some personal gain? Zidane carefully clung to the shadows as he quietly drew nearer to the man who's dark plans he had no choice but to end quickly. He was careful not to step on any

of the fallen leaves, for fear that there might be guards simply waiting where they could not be easily seen.

He was pretty sure he could handle Burtrard's guards if it came to that, but the last thing he needed was to give the people that apparently hated Dagger more fuel to use in rallying people against her. The thought that what he was doing might be hurting her as much as it was helping her was not lost on him, but it was too late to turn back now. He was so close he could smell the alcohol seeping from Burtrard despite the expensive perfumes that was meant to mask it. Were most nobles just drunks with money? Sure, he had drank his fair share, more if he was being honest, but at least he hadn't pretended to be something he wasn't. Had he?

He pushed the thoughts aside, and quietly pulled the dagger from his belt. In a matter of seconds, Burtrard would be done. "If you're going to kill me, have you not the stones to look me in the eyes?" Burtrard drawled, making him jump. How had he known he was there? He hadn't even glanced toward him. "Relax. I have no intention of alerting my guards, nor do I believe you will lay even a finger on me."

“And why is that?” Zidane asked guardedly, not moving from where he stood.

“Because knowledge is power, and power has always been the greatest form of currency. Rich as I may be, my wealth of knowledge far outweighs my wealth in coin. Do you believe that you are the first to try to kill me? No, there have been many others.” He finished, taking a drink of his wine then swirling what was left in the bottom of the delicate glass.

Zidane didn’t want to listen to the man because he was certain that anything he said would be lies, a gnawing doubt in the back of his mind wondered if he might hold some truths as well. “What knowledge do u think I would want to hear bad enough to not want to stop u?”

Burtrard did not answer for a moment, holding his gaze to the last of his wine as though lost in thought. “My knowledge always comes at a price. This time, the price is that you leave here and make no further attempts on my life. I know who you are, and I know that you have honor enough to hold to your word, as do I. So, those are my terms, I will tell you something I think is of great value to you. If you find yourself in agreement, then I live. As a bonus I suppose, I will make no further attempts to kill the

lovely Queen Garnet, for in truth I care little whether she lives or dies. It was merely a profitable venture. What say you? Do we have a deal?"

He still didn't think he could trust him, but what did he have to lose by listening? "Alright. But how will I know you're telling the truth?"

"You may judge that for yourself." Burtrard replied and downed the wine. "You think me some monster for my actions or some grand puppeteer? No, I am simply a cog in a very large wheel, playing the part that was given me. I too bow to others and must demonstrate my loyalty to stay alive. The world is changing; there is no use trying to stop it. Those in power, ones with influence and reach far greater than my own, have already set the wheels of that change in motion. Her majesty was to be killed simply because Alexandria need not be a part of the equation. I have never claimed my hands to be clean, but I would not have any woman slain were it given to me to decide. I would simply have her dethroned, the kingdom left to mind its own business. But I am afraid her fate has already been decided by others I cannot control."

Zidane mulled this over, and as much as he didn't want to believe Burtrard, he could feel the sincerity

behind his words. “Who is it that you bow to?”

“I will only give that information if you agree to spare my life and keep this meeting of ours a secret.” Burtrard replied firmly, though with little emotion.

With a grimace, Zidane slid the dagger back into his belt. “Tell me.”

For the first time, Burtrard turned toward him. “I know not who truly pulls the string, only the one who pays me handsomely.”

“Then who is that?”

“Someone I believe you knew quite well I believe, though I wonder how well you know her now.” Burtrard commented darkly.

“Who?” Zidane spat, but could feel his stomach drop in anticipation.

“Freya Crescent.

5. Heading to Burmecia

Dear Edgar,

How long have we known each other? It has been... many years. I believe we were children when first we met. Yes, one of my oldest memories is us playing in the stables attempting to scare the horses. We were trouble, weren't we? I know you are probably wondering why I am writing you, and you will be correct in assuming it is not simply to reminisce. I write to ask you a great big favor, as we used to call them. I would speak it to u in person, but I fear my words would fail me. I guess in a way, I have always been a coward. I know that I am the one that was born with noble blood, but why should our bloodlines determine our future? It is not fair! I ascend the throne in two months, and I haven't the heart to tell them that I will surely lead the kingdom to ruin! I am no more fit to be a king than the beggar that always stopped us at the end of Squire's Way... please I don't know what the solution is, but you were the one that had the answers, not I. So, if you can, and for the sake of a close friend, will you help me? With great thanks, Domitri

Zidane carefully closed the old book and gently placed back in his vest pocket. Why didn't Domitri want to be king? Wasn't that his duty to his people? He guessed that line of thinking was hypocritical, he was meant to be the angel of death after all; wasn't he? Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he got up from the broken piece of stone he had stopped to rest at. Burmecia wasn't too far away now, maybe a few more days at the most.

Traveling by himself hadn't been nearly as easy as he had hoped it would be. Even the weaker fiends that they had killed so easily back then was a struggle. Had he truly gotten so weak? As much as he didn't want to admit it, maybe Mikoto had been right.. maybe he would never regain his strength? What if he was not even strong enough to protect her? Especially if Freya really had..

No, it had to be a lie. If there was one person that had always cared about other people more than themselves, it was her. It would be impossible to name all the times she had helped him in the past, let alone everyone else. It had to be a lie. So, why was he sure that Burtrard had been telling the truth? He had always been able to tell when someone was lying; one of the benefits of growing up a thief, he supposed. If Freya really were behind this, would he

be able to stop her? Even if he was physically strong enough?

He looked down at the small pile of wood at his feet. Exhausted as he was, more wood was needed if he was gonna have a halfway decent fire. During their travels together, he had always enjoyed gathering firewood, but now he only looked at the small pile with resigned defeat. It would take at least a couple of hours to collect enough to last the night, let alone finding something he could kill and clean for food. Judging by the growls from his empty stomach, it was gonna be a long night.

...

The nights were steadily getting colder, and he hadn't been able to catch any food. The fire would last, but damn where was Quina when you needed him/her? Somehow Quina always managed to find food. He missed the meals they all had together, but more than anything he missed having someone to talk to, one person more so than the others. "Is she nice and warm in her castle bed without me?" Zidane rolled over on his cot facing the fire, its gentle wisps of flames trailing off into the night. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't imagined (hoped might be closer to the truth) on many nights that

back in Alexandria, she was lying awake in her bed thinking about him.

With that thought, always came the self-loathing that had become all too familiar to him. He knew it wasn't healthy, but he was powerless to make the thoughts go away. After all, had she ever even thought of him as more than a friend? One forced on her because she had no one better to turn to at the time? Hell, they had never even kissed... unless you counted that one night they had shared a bottle of whiskey after the others had fallen asleep. Even though she had not been able to talk it had been a night he wouldn't forget.

Zidane lay sprawled out on the lush grass, the nearby stream glistening coolly in the moonlight. The sound of it splashing gently over rocks and occasional cries of crickets were the only sounds filling the night air. Thankfully, he had managed to find this spot far enough away to avoid Steiner's snoring. Like other nights when he found the rare opportunity to be alone, his gaze was fixed solidly on the sky above him. Without breaking his gaze, he brought the bottle of whiskey to his lips and relished as the liquid burned its way down his throat.

Despite what most people would believe, he had never been much of a drinker. Even in his Tantalus days, Blank had often joked that he was a lightweight. The truth was it had nothing to do with not being able to handle his alcohol. Growing up, being a thief was all he had, and being drunk made you sloppy. All it took was being sloppy once or twice and you'd end up imprisoned or worse.

No, the only times he drank was when there was something he desperately needed to forget... how many nobles could say that? The thing was, lately, every time he saw her a part of him wanted to forget, because it hurt. The despair on Garnet's face was obvious to everyone, but every time he saw it, it was as though he could feel her pain and he swore that if she ever started back smiling he would do everything he could to help her stay that way. He had tried flirting with her earlier, if only to cheer her up, but it had only served to make her seem even more distant. What the hell was he thinking!? His tail smacked against the ground angrily and he downed another swig of whiskey. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? He—

His thoughts were cut short as a leaf crunched behind him; he didn't have to open his eyes to know who it was. He turned toward her and was met with

a stony gaze that flickered from his face to the half empty bottle. “Hey, uh, it’s not what it looks like..” he tried to defend lamely, but one look into her expression said that it was a waste of effort. “Okay, it’s exactly what it looks like.. But I’m not a drunk! I just.. Zidane trailed off as she picked up the glass bottle, studying it. Wondering if she would pour it out, he was startled when she quickly brought it to her lips and began to gulp.

“Woah! Hey! That’s not wine, you don’t wanna-!” He yelped, as he tried to grab the bottle, but missed. When he finally managed to take it from her, she had drunk most of the bottle. His initial shock was replaced with surprise at how much she had drank. She however, glared at him accusingly.

“Even I don’t chug the whole damn bottle!” He exclaimed, scratching the back of his head. “This is some really strong stuff.”

Her glare softened, but if anything she still seemed just as pained as she had been. “Want to sit with me?” Zidane asked softly.

When she crossed her arms and made no move to sit beside him, he added: “I’m sorry about earlier... I don’t know what I was thinking.” Turning back toward the stream, he tossed a small pebble into its

depths. “I tend to do that a lot around you, and i— anyway, I promise I won’t try anything.”

A few moments passed, but finally he heard her settle down in the grass beside him. At first, he thought maybe they would just sit quietly and enjoy each other’s company, but before long he couldn’t resist talking to her, even if she couldn’t answer back. “I um.. I’m sorry about what happened in Alexandria... All those people... I don’t know if I could have done anything to stop it, but I wish I would have gotten there sooner..”

He paused for a moment, but knew she wouldn’t be able to reply and he didn’t dare look at her face. “Steiner told me about how you led everyone, and that you couldn’t have done any better. I know I wasn’t there, but I know you and I know that you did everything you could. It wasn’t your fault. None of it. It’s those scumbags we have to stop!...”

Gathering up his courage, he turned to look at her. It was then that he saw the tears running down her face, any resolve he had left, with them. “Dag..” He breathed softly as he scooted closer and gently put his arm around her shoulders. To his surprise, she leaned in towards him instead of away. “Everything will be okay..”

She shook her head, her breath breaking into sobs.

“Look, I know I can’t fix anything that happened, but if you ever need someone to talk to, I mean if you ever need me... I’ll be here.”

Garnet broke from his embrace slightly and looked up into his eyes, the tears still glistening on her cheeks.

“It may not be worth much.” Zidane smiled sadly. “But I’d do anything for you.” He expected her to leave laugh maybe, what he didn’t expect was the feeling of her lips on his. It definitely wasn’t his first kiss, but even though he could smell the alcohol on her breath, it was unlike any kiss he’d had before.

“Thank the gods Freya had been keeping watch that night.” He thought as he absentmindedly tossed a stick into the fire. “Steiner would have never believed that all I did after that kiss was hold her till she passed out, then carried her back to camp. After all, since when does a thief do anything remotely honorable? I could have taken her then, if I’d wanted to. It had even made her angry that I wouldn’t do anything, but it wouldn’t have been right. For once I wanted to be the kind of man she deserved, it didn’t matter what anyone else thought...”

Zidane rolled back away from the fire and looked toward where Burmecia would soon be. “I know I’ve let you down before, but one way or the other, I won’t let you down again.”

6. Freya

A/n: I'd like to take a second to thank everyone that has stuck with me through my often incredibly slow updates and still continue to read my stories. You guys are the best! I've had a lot of unexpected life changes since i began this story, and things have grown far more hectic, to the point that i have very little free time to myself. That being said i do intend to finish this story as well as Underworld, though I will be placing it on the backburner as very few people have read the last few chapter and seem to enjoy this story more. I mostly blame my sporadic writing during Underworld and may eventually do a complete revision, but even so i do feel it has helped better my writing. Anyway, thanks again to those of you still reading this story, and if you enjoy this chapter feel free to review or pm me your thoughts!

...

Rain poured onto the streets of Burmecia, splattering off rooftops and running in small streams toward the lower part of the city. In a back alley nestled in the poor district of the city, Zidane fell onto his hands and knees, gasping desperately for air

each breath that brought with it sharp stabs of pain. The red cloaked figure he had been chasing was now nowhere to be seen. His head swam with questions he couldn't focus on as it took almost all the energy he had left not to blackout and simply lay a broken mess on the walkway. With resolve that teetered on the edge of breaking, he pushed himself unsteadily to his feet and carefully staggered to a nearby bench.

He sat, or rather collapsed onto the bench; his vision swimming with no blame laid to the ever-persistent rain. The events that had just happened flooded his mind. Had it all been true? Had Freya truly ordered Dagger's murder? The more he tried to focus, the more tinged with shadow his thoughts became. Realizing there was little use fighting it, he let the exhaustion wash over him and faded into unconsciousness.

...

An hour earlier...

"Freya, Wait!" Zidane yelled, as he caught a glimpse of a familiar red cloak in the distance. He started forward but ended up crashing into a young boy carrying a basket of fruit sending fruit scattering in all directions.

“Sorry!” He apologized, and helped the boy pick up the fallen fruit. When he returned his gaze to where he thought Freya had previously stood, she was gone.

The streets of Burmecia were more crowded than he had ever remembered. It became immediately apparent that a lot more Burmecians had survived Queen Brahne’s maniacal attack than he had believed. Not only that but judging from their attire, many Cleyrans had survived as well and had joined in making this city their home. Many of the buildings still showed some signs of the war, but as a whole, the city had been rebuilt and was larger than it had ever been.

After a while of fruitlessly trying to find her again, he decided that his best bet would be to stop at the pub. Not only was there a decent chance that he could possibly run into her there, but he also at least needed to get some water. He fished in his pocket and eventually pulled out five gil. It wasn’t much, but he should at least be able to get some fresh bread. At this point, even that sounded mouthwatering compared to the dried meat he had been eating.

The pub itself wasn't quite as packed as the streets outside, so it wasn't long before Zidane was sitting quietly in the corner with his bread and a mug of beer that the waiter had generously given him. The bread was delicious, but the one mug of beer was more than enough to quench his thirst. He had had more than a few nights of weakness on his way here that he would have gladly drank until nothing else mattered if given the chance, but now that it sat before him, he had no desire to be drunk.

It was hard to explain, it wasn't that those same reasons weren't there, it was more that he wanted to be better... Even if he never had the chance to be with the woman he had fallen helplessly in love with, He would be there for her, whether she knew it or not. Not only that, but maybe if he traveled down the right path and made his own destiny, then one day he could look back and be proud of the person he had been. While it was true he couldn't change who he was, he could work on the things that mattered! Just because everyone saw him as a low life thief it didn't meant he had to—

His thoughts were cut short as a glimpse of red caught his attention from the corner of his eye. "Freya!" Zidane exclaimed happily. He expected her to greet him warmly or with sarcasm as she always

had at seeing the tailed thief, but instead she turned and fled. Not wanting to lose her again, he bolted after her knocking over a few barstools in the process. “Freya!” Zidane yelled her name, pushing through the doorway of the pub and onto the street. She had already gained a considerable distance on him, but he was determined to get some answers. Rounding a corner into an alley, he pushed himself harder than he had since his injury.

He was gaining on her. Despite the rain, he rounded each corner without sliding and with each one kept closing the distance between them. He just needed to go a little faster... It didn’t take but a few short breaths however, for him to realized that it had been a mistake. Sharp pains shot from his side, white hot in their fury. With a gasp, he stumbled onto the ground. He couldn’t lose her now! He had to find out what had happened to her! He chose to ignore the burns of protest from his body and pushed himself up and after Freya again. The chances of catching her now were slim, but if he could just match her pace...

His vision began to blur, and the cries of pain he had tried desperately to ignore had become screams of agony that consumed all thought. This time, as he collapsed onto his hands and knees gasping for

breaths that all but refused to come, he knew he wouldn't be catching her anytime soon..

...

When Zidane finally awoke, it became readily apparent that he was no longer in Burmecia. Instead of the wet concrete bench he clearly remembered collapsing on, his face was pressed against something hot and dry. He tried opening his eyes, but quickly closed them as the hot sun burned his vision. The inside of his mouth felt dry as sand. No, it was sand! He hacked and coughed, trying to get it out of his mouth, gods he was thirsty. How long had he been lying here? Forcing his eyes to open despite the sun's burning rays, his vision finally focused onto his surroundings. He was in a desert.

With a groan, he pushed himself into a sitting position. In the distance, shimmering from the heat, he could make out the charred remains of what had once been Cleyra.

“Cleyra?” He asked hoarsely. “How?”

He tried to remember how he might have gotten there, but there was nothing. Looking down at the sand behind him, the meagre contents of his pack lay scattered, clearly having been searched. What had

they hoped to find? With a sudden feeling that neared panic, he realized that he didn't see the book he had held so closely since the start of his journey. It wasn't that the book was valuable, though it likely was given its age, it was that it had given him a kind of hope he couldn't quite place. Quickly he dug through the sand all around where his pack lay but just as he was considering giving up looking for it, he spotted the corner of the worn binding jutting out of the sand a few feet nearby.

He knew the chances of him ever being a king were unrealistic and farfetched, but he had found comfort in the fact that, according to the book at least, a person's blood hadn't always determined their worth. More than that, it gave him the hope that sometimes simply doing what you knew was right was enough. Despite his disorientation and thirst from waking up in the desert, he could remember one passage clearly as though it had been burned into his mind.

Passing of the Grain

The drought had been particularly harsh that year. Most of the crops had already withered away and I feared that we too would meet the same fate. As a new king with little experience in matters such

as the structure of the economy or the hierarchy of the nobles, facing a drought in the first year seemed to surely be a bad omen. Had I accepted the crown only to watch the people, my people, starve? It sickened me that down below in the streets of the poor, a single loaf of bread was a high commodity most could not afford and yet, there we sat high in our castle with a feast laid out before us.

The council had still not taken kindly to my ascension to the throne, and even less kindly to many of my ideals. I have no doubt their disapproval deepened when I began to refuse their lavish meals and demand that they instead be delivered to the city.

Throughout the city, there was a mixture of surprise and confusion at first as it was something that had never been done before. I knew that they would be grateful for the food, but what I hadn't expected was the level of comradery and compassion from the people that even my advisors scarce believed. There were of course nobles that continued to hoard their wealth and food stores for themselves, but the vast majority began to share their grain with one another. Many that would have surely died during that drought, received nourishment enough to survive.

To my dying day, I will never forget the magnitude in which one's single act of kindness can change the lives of many.

Zidane picked himself up from the sand, and even though his knees shook under his weight, they held. He had to find water, that's just all there was to it. Judging from his surroundings, the only place nearby that had a chance of having any was Cleyra. With conviction, he walked toward the charred remains of the giant tree trunk

...

A few hours later...

He wiped the sweat from his forehead again and continued digging into the sand with his bare hands. Dammit what he wouldn't give for a shovel! He had been digging at the bottom of what was left of the tree trunk for a little while now, and both arms were burning from the exertion but with each scoop the sand was getting progressively wetter. Encouraged by a tiny amount of water collecting at the bottom of the hole, he dug with renewed vigor until the hole was big enough to sip the water once it filled. The water that seeped through the sand was anything but clear, however, that didn't make it any less refreshing to the tired thief.

Resting his head back against the wall of the trunk, he closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the wind blowing through the holes in the wood.

“Help...”

His eyes jerked open, and he pushed himself back up, looking around. Had he imagined that? There wasn't anyone else around that he could see. There might have still been caves he had never found, but could someone have fallen in a hole or something?

“Hello?” Zidane called loudly but heard only his echo in return. He had to have imagined it. It was dark outside now, only the moons pale light gave shape to his surroundings. Shaking his head, he realized he must have fallen asleep and been dreaming.

“Please!...”

This time, he knew he couldn't have imagined it. The voice had been faint, but it had come from below him. He couldn't see any door or tunnel nearby, only the broken and charred walls of the tree. With a start, he felt the ground begin to shake and a mound of sand started to rise from the center of the trunk.

As something metal began to appear from beneath the sand, he decided to err on the side of caution and duck behind a piece of the broken trunk, peeking around the edge. It was the entrance to a tunnel! So that's where the voices had come from...

"I swear this job is the pits!" A Burmecian Soldier exclaimed as he stepped out of the entrance.

"That's because it is the pit." A second soldier commented, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"How in the hell did we get stuck with this job in the first place?" The first one complained, planting the end of his lance in the ground and looking around.

"Damned if I know, but now I have blood on my fur. Do you have any idea how hard it gonna be to get it out once it dries?" The second whined, shaking his leg uselessly.

"You're the one that decided to kick worthless clod instead of using your lance!" The first cackled, walking away from the entrance and looking up at the moon. "Sure is nice to be back outside. I wish we could just kill them all, then we wouldn't have to go back down there in that filth."

Zidane watched as the other soldier joined his friend, wondering if he'd have time to sneak into the entrance before they turned around. He had to know who was down there. No matter who it was they didn't deserve what these guards had obviously been doing to them. Deciding not to waste any more time thinking about it, he quietly slipped past them and into the metal doorway.

The smell that hit him was atrocious and could only be described as death. Thankfully growing up poor with Tantalus had hardened his stomach and for the most part was able to ignore it as he climbed his way down the ladder of the dimly lit tunnel. How long had this place been here buried beneath the sand? As his feet stepped firmly onto the concrete floor of the bottom, ahead of him through a narrow-arched corridor, he could now clearly hear crying and groans of misery.

He felt sick with pity as he walked down the rows of jail cells and saw the condition of the prisoners within. Many had obviously been beaten and tortured, while others looked so starved that he wondered how they were still alive. He wasn't a fool; he knew all kingdoms had jails and torture chambers where they imprisoned spies, traitors, and

even thieves like him, but many of these prisoners were women and children!

“Help us..” A woman crawled toward the bars weakly. ‘Even If you can’t help me... Please... Save my little boy.’ She choked, breaking down into sobs. “They threw us in here... said they didn’t want... didn’t want our kind dirtying up the streets! Please... my little boy is starving...”

“I’ll help you.” Zidane replied, locking eyes with the sobbing woman then turning to look at the others, I’ll help all of you! Together we can— “His voice broke and he felt he might lose his balance as he turned toward the last cell.

Though tattered and unconscious, In the middle of the stone floor lay a woman dressed in a familiar red cloak.

7. Escape

“Freya!” Zidane gasped, grabbing onto the metal bars. Judging from the condition she was in, it was obvious that she had been there quite a while. So, who then had he chased in Burmecia? He could feel the anger at her injuries welling up inside of him as he hurriedly picked the lock of the cell, wary that the guards might return any minute. Hearing the expected click, he pulled the door open and hurried to her side. Reaching into his bag, he wasted no time grabbing his last potion and carefully pouring it into her mouth.

Freya coughed and hacked painfully, but she was alive and she was still breathing. He doubted she would be strong enough to regain her consciousness for quite a while at best, so he would have to carry her. But how would he find the strength to get her and the others up the ladder and across the desert? He wasn't in the best condition either, but he would have to find a way because he couldn't leave her, he couldn't leave any of them. That's just all there was to it. Trying his best to clear his mind again, he figured there had to be another way out; whoever controlled the prison wouldn't have wanted to carry

their prisoners out of the city and across the open desert.

“If ye let us go, ah’ll show ye how to get out o’ ere.” Someone with a deep voice drawled from the cell behind him. “Me and ma gang got what was comin ta us, we ain’t no eroes. But, if ye let us out, we’ll help ye and tha o’thers.”

Zidane turned around and saw that it was a very large man, and had it not been for the numerous scars covering his face and his disfigured nose, he might have looked a little bit like Steiner. Behind him were five other men of various statures.

“After we’re done, you go your way, and we’ll go ours. No questions asked.” A shorter stocky man standing behind what he had assumed was the gang’s leader added. ‘Those guards aren’t gonna stay outside long!’ A third member hurried. “C’mon already!”

If the gang chose instead to kill him and save themselves, there would be little he could do to stop them, but what choice did he have? A few short moments later their cell was open, and true to their word, all but one of the gang hurriedly began to help him unlock the other cells and release all of the prisoners. The last member of the gang came from

the entrance as Zidane picked the last lock, he hadn't even noticed him heading in that direction. "Those two guards outside won't be bothering us anytime soon." He commented casually.

Nodding on acknowledgement, the stocky man turned back to Zidane. "The way they brought us in is through there." He pointed to a small passage between two of the cells. "There won't be too many guards, if any. Why bother when they know most of the people in here are starving and don't have the energy to escape? Your only problem is gonna be when get to the surface."

"I'm guessing its heavily guarded?" Zidane groaned, expecting the worse.

"The entrance is a cave next to the mountains, it may not be heavily guarded, but there will at least be a few of those bastards blocking our way." He replied with a grunt and spat on the ground. "It won't be easy with only that one knife you're carrying, but I think we can take em."

"I though you said we were gonna have a problem?" Zidane asked, surprised.

"No." He shook his head. "I said you were gonna have a problem. Unless u want all the people right

back in here, you're gonna have to steal an airship and get them the hell away from here."

There were no comments from anyone in the now large group. He doubted stealing an airship would be anywhere near as easy as last time but he could see the man's point. "Ill take care of it." He replied.

"Then that's that. Once we're past the entrance, we part ways. And for your sake, let's hope we don't see each other again or it might not be under such pleasant circumstances." Zidane nodded, and picking up Freya, He and the people that were healthy enough began the long walk down the dark tunnel, those that couldn't walk were carried. He had no idea how to steal the airship, nor did he have any idea where he would take all of the people, but he did know that the prisoners wouldn't be able to make it on their own, so one way or another he had to get them somewhere safe; he just hoped Dagger would be alright because he had no idea how long it would take... "Please Rusty, keep her safe and don't let me down."

6 Months Later...

"Please! It has been over a year! Surely you must be able to see reason!" A shrill voice yelled behind the heavy wooden door.

On the other side, Garnet slowly sank to the floor, her hands covering her tear-stained face. There was no doubt about it, It had been a tough year. She had never expected being queen to be easy, but there were days like today when she wished she had just stayed in bed.

“We are not being unreasonable. Her Majesty knew it would be expected of her before she ascended the throne!” The man continued, though in a lower tone. She assumed that he must have diverted his attention fully to Beatrix.

“Give her time..” Beatrix soothed the man. “You cannot expect her to take the idea of marrying someone she barely knows so lightly.”

Garnet could hear the grunt of displeasure from them man. “I am only trying to help her.” He reassured. “Though there are others in the council that would sooner see her removed altogether for her lack of royal blood, I have supported her from the beginning! I have no desire to see her miserable, but that fact is, she is better off unhappy in an arranged marriage than dead. Aside from marrying a noble of high rank, I see no other way to prevent further—”

“Your loyalty to her is not in question Sibert, but you must understand that she is still young.” Beatrix

interrupted. “In time I am sure that she will do what is best for the kingdom..” Though she couldn’t hear it, Garnet could picture Sibert sighing in defeat. Moments later, his footsteps could be heard as he walked down the hallway.

Was she being stupid, or just selfish? Garnet pondered as she pushed herself from the floor and walked towards the balcony window. Beatrix was right, she had always known what would be expected of her once she had ascended the throne. Up until the unexpected twists and turns her life had taken, she had actually fancied the idea of one day marrying a handsome noble, or rather a “knight in shining armor”. Didn’t all young girls have those same silly dreams? Sadly that’s all they were, HE had taught her that. Often, the one that wore the best armor and the nicest suits showed that those were truly the best qualities they possessed.

According to the council, the best candidate so far for her to marry was Lord Gerain, one of the richest nobles in Treno. He was ten years her senior, but his immense wealth would guarantee Alexandria’s economic stability. Not only that, but it would also secure a lasting alliance with what was now the wealthiest city in Gaia. The advantages of marrying him were both many and obvious to

anyone that knew anything about politics, but at what cost would they come? Even if she again put her kingdom first and pushed her own feelings to the side again, how long would it be till he used the throne for his own personal gain?

Garnet leaned on the railing of the balcony, relishing the cool night air. Down below, only a few of the homes in the city had candlelight emanating from their windows. She guessed most of the townspeople were already asleep by now as the only noise that reached her was the faint slushing from the water below. Looking up at the stars that covered the cloudless night sky, she caught herself wondering if Zidane was looking up at it too? For months after his departure, she had sent countless search parties to try to find some trace of him, but even her closest friends and Tantalus, who had gained her immense respect, had come back empty handed. Was there a chance he was still out there somewhere? She shook her head disgusted at how weak she felt. The bottle of wine she had absentmindedly grabbed on her way to the balcony was proof enough of that. How many nights had she stood here and cried, begged for him to swoop in and knock her off her feet? Like a child, a part of her still imagined him showing up out of nowhere

wearing shining armor and carrying her off into the sunset. But Zidane wasn't a knight in shining armor.. he was a thief. And what a thief he was! Despite her best efforts, he had stolen her heart as easily as gil from a noble in a crowded street!

She laughed loudly, taking another drink of the wine. How many had she had? She didn't care. Myricaria was the strongest wine that was kept in the store rooms, but like the tears that burned their way down her cheeks again, she barely noticed.

Memories of their journey together played through her mind unimpeded, but despite her best efforts the darker thoughts couldn't be held at bay. Had he forgotten about her and found someone else? Was Beatrix right, had he died in the Lifa tree?

Angrily, she threw the empty bottle over the railing and into the water below. "No!" She screamed. She refused to believe he was dead. But if he was alive, why hadn't he come back?

She hated him. She hated him for leaving. She hated him for not telling her how he had really felt. She hated that winning smile of his and how he was always ready to help anyone whether they deserved it or not. She hated how he had always showed more compassion and kindness than anyone else ever had.

But mostly, she hated herself for not telling him that she loved him and still did. She hated herself for all the time she hadn't told him thank you when pretty much everything he had done had been for her. Her own stubbornness had pushed him away. As her vision blurred through the tears, a bitter truth became impossible to deny. Zidane wasn't coming back.

Tomorrow, she would work on doing what was best for the kingdom, her feelings be damned. It didn't matter anymore what she wanted, she wouldn't let herself act like a helpless princess. She would be the queen Alexandria needed, even stronger than her mother had ever been. One way or the other, she would see Alexandria rebuilt, grander still than even her advisors hoped. She would do it her way, not just be pushed to the side as an instrument to ensure some king's lineage. No, SHE would do it, and she would do it alone if that's what it took. Alexandria was all she had left and she would protect it. But for tonight, she decided as she closed the balcony and sank onto the bed, she would let herself cry this one last time.

8. Outcasts

Sparks flew and a metallic clang resonated through the woods as the metal spear clashed against the blade of the dagger.

“You’re looking a lot better!” Zidane chuckled, struggling to catch his breath.

Freya smiled warmly, though her face betrayed her concern. “I’d say you were going easy on me, but you don’t look so good.”

Zidane scratched the back of his head sheepishly and turned to look toward the black mage village just across a small stream. “Miko says I’m doin great.”

“We both know that’s a lie.” Freya replied taking a seat on a nearby stump to rest. “That girl is rarely optimistic about anything and you’re exhausted after sparing for only a few minutes. So, what did she really say?”

Zidane sighed. “Can’t ever leave it alone can you?”

“No.” She replied simply.

“I just cut it a lot closer in the Lifa Tree than I first thought..” He evaded.

“You’re gonna have to give me a better answer than that. Besides, you still owe me an explanation for why you never let any of us know that you were still alive! I’m sure Garnet is worried sick about u!”

“She was worried?” He asked, trying to hide his surprise.

“You astound me with how blind you can be at times.” Freya commented, shaking her head in exasperation. “Now out with it.”

Zidane laughed softly in defeat. He had always known the woman’s stubbornness was pretty much unmatched. “I finally made it to Kuja, but he was already too far gone..” He paused searching for the right words. “When I saw all the roots crashing towards us, I was sure I’d be joining him. I tried grabbing him and rolling out of the way, but as soon as I thought I had cleared them, an explosion of pain shot through me and everything went black..”

Zidane bent down and picked up a smooth stone near the edge of the stream and skipped it across the water. Freya didn’t press for him to continue, but he finally did. “When I woke up, I found out that Miko

saved me. Not only did she dig me out of that damned tree, but she figured out how to use the invincible to fix most of my injuries, even though it still took me about six months to get well enough to do anything on my own.”

“But we asked Mikoto, and she said there had been no trace of you.” Freya defended.

“I told her not to tell anyone.” Zidane replied guiltily.

Freya shook her head again in disbelief. “You didn’t want us to know you were alive because you were bed ridden? After everything we’ve all been through together? Do you think I’m foolish enough to believe that’s the reason?”

“Even if I had told everyone I was alive, it still wouldn’t have changed a damn thing!” Zidane exclaimed in exasperation, his tail thrashing.

“You mean with Garnet..” Freya replied, working it out in her head. “Because you’re a thief and she’s a queen?”

“That’s how it works, isn’t it?” He spat bitterly.

“There’s no law saying she has to marry a prince.” She offered sympathetically.

Zidane turned back towards her. “Even if she could marry me, why would she want to? What good is a thief that’s not even good at stealing anymore?”

“You stole that airship didn’t you? How did you manage that by the way?” She chuckled, standing up and joining him beside the stream. When he made no reply, she lowered voice and became more serious as she asked “I take it Mikoto wasn’t able to heal you completely..? You’re not going to..?”

“I’m not gonna die anytime soon.” He replied with forced optimism, not looking at her. “But I’m sure as hell not gonna get any better either.. all it takes is for me to try running just a little too fast, or to fight just a little bit too hard and I’m gonna collapse again and if by some miracle I manage to get back up afterwards I’ll be even weaker. There’s no fixing me! Yea, I hated knowing I was just a thief, but at least I was able to do it well! Half the time I feel like I can barely walk or that I would fall down if I wasn’t holding on to something; so what good am I now?”

“I fall down all the time, but that never stopped you from wanting me to go with you.” A small voice answered from behind them. Instantly recognizing it, Zidane and Freya turned around sharply.

“Vivi!” Freya exclaimed cheerfully. “I haven’t seen you since you went on the first airship to look for Zidane!”

Vivi adjusted his hat shyly. “Mikoto wanted me to try to find something to help make a potion that would help the other black mages. I think I found what she was looking for, but I don’t know if it will work or not..”

“I’m sure Miko will be able to come up with something!” Zidane smiled; his dark mood gone at the sight of his friend.

“I’m trying to stay optimistic like you taught me. No matter how bad things seemed, you always looked on the bright side of things.” Vivi replied, in what Zidane thought was a smile.

“You don’t seem to be too surprised at seeing Zidane alive.” Freya commented after a moment with a raised eyebrow.

“You knew I was alive?” Zidane asked, though his voice held no bitterness.

Vivi looked down and fidgeted with his gloves. “I was with Mikoto when she found you. I helped her fight off the monsters while she and um.. another genome carried you. I wanted to come talk to you

after you woke up, but Mikoto said you didn't want us to know that you were there. She would have let me come see you anyway, but I didn't want to make you feel worse..”

“Vivi.. I'm sorry I didn't mean to—” Zidane began but Vivi interrupted. “It's ok. Sometimes when I feel upset, I don't want to talk to anyone either. When we were traveling together, you taught us how to do almost everything: what we could do if we felt hungry, what to do if we were attacked at night, how to stay warm if it was cold, how to stay cheerful when it felt like we should feel anything but... The only thing you didn't teach us was what to do when we felt lonely...” Vivi looked over at two black mages that had begun to pick apples nearby. “For a long time I didn't understand why you never taught us that, but after I traveled alone for a while I finally understood.”

“What did you understand?” Zidane asked.

“I realized it was because there is no answer. I think that even though we're all different, in a way we always feel alone and maybe it never really goes away.. but if we can find someone or some place that makes us happy, a place to call home, then maybe it can make us forget about the bad things we can't

change.. I know I'm going to 'stop' eventually, but if I can help find a way to help the other black mages live longer, or reproduce as Mikoto says, and them be happy then that will make me happy too."

Without warning, Zidane dropped to his knees and hugged the black mage. "Thank you."

....

"It's going to be winter soon, but if we can keep it up I think we just might make it." Zidane commented as he watched a mixture of Burmecians, Cleyrans, Terrans, black mages, and even a few people that had once resided in Lindblum and Alexandria worked on building a larger stable for the chocobos. He wondered vaguely if they should be referred to as any of those things, since the tiny village had tripled in size and everyone there now called it home. He didn't guess it mattered, but one thing he did know is that there was a lot to like here.

While it was true that the surge of newcomers, especially those in dire health, had been a heavy burden on the genomes and mages; they hadn't seemed to mind. Food had run out quickly, as had potions and antidotes, but fortunately he and the black mages had been able to make arrangements with the dwarfs who were more than willing to trade

them most of the things they needed in exchange for those help digging in a new mithril mine they had discovered. The dwarfs were hard workers, but there wasn't enough of them to make any real progress. Zidane thought its was more than a fair trade, especially since the dwarfs were also willing to share a portion of the mithril, but had thought it best to leave it up to the villagers themselves. The discussion proved both short and decisive, with most of the men who weren't building new homes volunteering immediately. And so, things began to steadily improve and grow.

Many of the trees near the village had been cut down and used for wood and provide a clearing for the town to grow into a city. Not only that, but since the threat of the mages being found and killed had passed, a clear path had been made to allow easier trading. Everyone working together as equals had made the job seem almost enjoyable. He couldn't lie and say it had been easy for everyone to get along at first, after the initial shock of being freed had passed many had shown varying levels of distanced to others. The Burmecians and Cleyrans blamed the Alexandrians for what had happened to them, the Alexandrians blamed the Burmecians. The few people from Lindblum had mostly kept to

themselves, but had panicked when he had told them they would be staying with the Black mages, even the others had stopped their arguing to express their outrage. Persuading them that the black mages were friendly and not monsters had probably been the hardest argument he had ever had, but look at them now.

The people whose homes had been destroyed by Kuja's mages now welcomed these black mages as if they were family, even holding funerals for two of them that had "stopped" in which everyone attended. Thanks to Vivi, Mikoto had finally found a potion to greatly extend the black mages lifespans. While that wouldn't stop them from dying out eventually, it would help those that were still alive enjoy their lives as long as most humans, and that had been worth celebrating. As for the Genomes, they had all started off mostly child-like, but now they had all begun to develop their own personalities, each with their own likes and dislikes. Many of them had grown to dislike looking the same as all the others, and had all but forced Mikoto to take time from her other projects to come up with a way to change their appearances. Some had chosen to keep their tails and simply changer their hair or eye color, while others opted to have it removed in order to look

more human like someone they fancied or to simply be different than how they were created. As a result, the city now teemed with people of every conceivable race and variation and yet, for the most part everyone was treated equally.

Despite his inner objections and hesitations, everyone constantly turned to him when a major decision was to be made, and with a large thanks to Freya's wisdom he knew, he had managed to them happy and steer the city in the right direction. Jokingly, Freya had referred to him as their king during a town gathering. To his utter surprise and disbelief, many had begun to chant "King Zidane! King Zidane!" At first, he had refused to accept it declaring that he was just a normal guy, like everyone else there. But, a woman in the back had stood and declared him hero, thanking him for saving her and her son. Many others chimed in about various things he had done for them and that he was the one they wanted to lead them.

So now, about a year and a half from the day he had chose to walk away from Garnet and the others to try to save Kuja, and to escape the harsh reality that he would ever only be a thief and she a distant Queen, here he stood a thief king of a kingdom of outcasts. With Freya as his close friend and advisor,

and Vivi there to remind him of the things that mattered, it almost seemed doable. They hadn't yet decided a name for their kingdom, but that would come in time. Whether he could admit it or not to himself, he had become someone he could almost be proud of. What would Baku say if he were there and could see him now? He'd probably tell him he was a lousy thief. Because, even with everything he had now, he was still a long way from the one thing he wanted most. Alexandria's greatest treasure wasn't anything kept locked in a vault, and one way or another even if he couldn't be with her, he would see her again and at least tell her how he felt. That was a promise.

...

A/N: Just wanted to say a quick thank you to all of you that continue to stick with me chapter after chapter and especially to the ones that took the time and effort to leave a review or messaged me! I can't express just how much your kind words mean to me and I really hope you enjoyed this chapter as well!

9. Bad Blood

Winter had certainly begun to arrive In Alexandria; late at night and in the early hours of the mornings frost could be found covering the castle windowpanes. At two hours past midnight, most everyone in the castle as well as in the city had long since retired for the night, finding comfort in the warmth of their beds. Even most of the heavy drinkers at the downtown pub had already called it quits for the night.

Queen Garnet, on the other hand, had no intention of going to sleep anytime soon. Working by candlelight, she dipped her quill into the dark ink and began signing yet another parchment in the large stack of documents awaiting her approval. Some dealt with day-to-day affairs such as the amount of taxes collected or the amounts of grain that had been added to the castle stores, others she had deemed more urgent.

The previous parchment she had signed her approval for had been a formal letter requesting a stay of execution from the wife of a man who had killed his fellow carpenter. She pleaded for his

execution to be delayed a few days until she could prove that it had been an unfortunate accident and misunderstanding.

The one she was reading now was a “polite” request from a large group of nobles demanding that their taxes be greatly reduced, as much of the grain that had be collected into the castle stores had come from farms they controlled. As a result, they felt they were suffering the blow of the impending winter more than others. It went on and on detailing their reasoning, but instead of finishing it or applying her royal seal, Garnet shuffled it back into the bottom of the pile to deal with later.

Frowning at the large discrepancy between her “done” pile and the stack she still had left to finish before the following week, she let out a tired sigh and propped her chin on her arms. It wasn’t that she was lazy, she reassured herself, everything had just been so hectic lately. In the last couple of weeks, reconstruction of the city had ground to a halt. Most of the nobles and city folk blamed the halt of construction on the need to prepare for winter. While this was also true, the fact is that as whole, Alexandria was completely broke.

Groaning, she looked down at her pendant that rested near the edge of her desk. Subconsciously she knew she had scooted it to the edge of the desk so she wouldn't have to think about the possibility of parting with it. Just the thought of parting with the famous royal jewel would be ludicrous to most, but little did they know that under her direction the majority of the jewels that had survived the castle's destruction had already been sold or traded to fund restoring the people's homes. She snickered slightly at the thought of how her "wealthy suitors" would react if they knew the vault was pretty much empty.

Did that make her a horrible queen? She shrugged the thought off, grabbed the next document, and began to read through it. She knew her advisors blamed her for the condition of the treasury; not only had she refused to increase the citizen's tax rate, which she already thought was too high, but she had also adamantly refused to entertain suitors as well. It was obvious that they had a valid point, marrying a wealthy lord of Treno would finally cement an alliance with the thriving city and give Alexandria the economic boost it needed to be even better than it had been under her mother's rule. Placing her seal on the document, she moved onto the next one. "Speaking of suitors." Garnet groaned

as she looked at the first, of what she knew was many, requests for her audience. They would all be worded differently, but they all might as well have said “I want to marry you so that I can be king!”

Even though she still had many reservations about what the consequences of a noble being king would be, she had exhausted every solution she could come up with on her own. How bad could it be? Both Steiner and Beatrix had assured her that after she married, they would stay fiercely loyal to her, even protecting her from the new king if need be. The thought of agreeing to spending her life and bearing children for someone she barely knew repulsed her, but she had sworn to do what was best for the kingdom and if that meant she had to be miserable, then so be it. Clenching her teeth, she began signing her approval to each one that didn’t sound completely absurd or that asked her to consent to the marriage without even meeting them.

One letter however, caught her attention. It was from someone claiming to be the King of *Mélamar*. She furrowed her eyebrows at it, not remembering any kingdom they had encountered during their journey with that name. Maybe it had been very small, and they had just missed it? She decided to read it more carefully.

Your Majesty,

I hope this letter finds you, and finds you well. I guess I should start by saying that I'm sorry I haven't written sooner. With the help of my sister and dear friends, I'm slowly getting better at expressing my inner thoughts and learning how to cope with the changes in my life that I hadn't expected. I know that you probably get hundreds of letters professing love for you or asking for your hand in marriage, but personally, I think things like that should be done in person when the time is right. I also know that Alexandria has to be suffering. Until recently, I had no idea how hard it was just getting a kingdom ready for winter. I can't imagine what you've been through trying to do it on your own. In a way, that's the reason I am writing you.

My kingdom, or rather the one that chose me to be its king, isn't a very large kingdom but it is growing every day. I honestly didn't expect it to keep growing the way it has, but people keep showing up looking for a home and I refuse to turn them away. As it stands, the biggest struggle has been keeping up with the demands for food, but I think we may have solved that with a way to continue growing crops during the winter months. I'm afraid I can't offer you a fortune to repair your kingdom, but if

you will accept it, we will share this technology we've discovered with you along with as much of our extra Gil as can be spared. It won't be much, but hopefully it will help until we can collect more.

I've recently learned that all things come at a price, some much higher than we ever hoped to pay. I guess my kingdom's price is that hopefully you will consider my us an ally in the future and that we can help each other prosper. As for me, I ask only for a few moments of your time and would be honored to have an opportunity to meet you again.

Sincerely, The King of Mélar

“Again?” She asked aloud, puzzled. When had they met? Would an alliance with this supposed kingdom of Mélar be the help Alexandria needed? If the letter was true and honest, she might not have to marry! Garnet chuckled at herself. Things were never that easy, so there was no point in holding out hope for something that was probably just someone's idea of a cruel joke. But, it had seemed so genuine and sincere; she mused. Had she really met this king before?

“Your majesty, will you be retiring soon?” Beatrix inquired through the crack in the door, sounding tired.

“Gods!” Garnet startled, dropping the letter. She had gotten so lost in what she was doing that she had completely forgotten that Beatrix had been waiting patiently outside the do.

“My apologies!” Beatrix started quickly. “I did not mean to scare you.”

“No.” Garnet replied, willing her heart to slow down. “I guess I’m just a little on edge lately.”

“If I’m not overstepping,” Beatrix began. “Have you come to any decisions?”

Garnet looked back at the desk and picked up the sealed documents, extending them out to the general. “I’ve decided I will marry, so I need to have these returned to their senders.”

Beatrix gingerly took them, tucking them away in her breast pocket. “Are you certain this is what you want?”

“Gods no!” Garnet replied louder than she had expected, then deflated. “What other choice do I have!? If I don’t do something, people will begin to revolt! A few people have tried to kill me already..”

“Don’t worry, I will not let—” Beatrix defended, but was interrupted.

“I know, I apologize for snapping at you. Maybe it is time for me to get some rest?”

Beatrix smiled at her understandingly and ushered her out of the room. “You have not been sleeping much lately.”

“Do you blame me?” She countered.

“No, I have not slept well either; though Steiner seems to be even more troubled than I.”

“Any idea what’s bothering him?” Garnet asked, as they opened the door to her royal chamber.

“He seems to be worried that—” Beatrix immediately cut the sentence short and drew her sword as the room came into view. The balcony window stood open, and the sheets had been ripped from the bed hurriedly. Drawers and their contents were scattered across the floor.

Garnet gasped as she took in the chaos from the entryway. “How did someone get in here?”

Noticing something she couldn’t see, Beatrix commented. “You should leave, your majesty. This isn’t something you should see.”

Pushing past her, Garnet took in the view that had been obscured by a large armoire and covered her

mouth in disbelief. “*DEATH TO THE BAD BLOOD QUEEN*” Lay smeared on the wall near her head. Lissy, a chambermaid that she grown close to and often considered something of a sister, lay slumped against the wall covered in a pool of her own blood.

“No!” Garnet sobbed, dropping to her knees.

“I’m so sorry, your majesty..” Beatrix offered softly, gently grabbing her by the arm. “But we need to get you out of here. The killer could still be nearby.”

“I’ll kill him!” Garnet hissed through gritted teeth and clenched fists. “I’ll kill whoever did this! She didn’t deserve it!”

“Until they are found, there is nothing we can do.” Beatrix replied dejectedly.

“Then I’ll find them! I’ll find the scumbag that did this!” She persisted, trying to pull her arm free. “Let go of me, Damn you!”

“I’m sorry, but you have to calm down and listen to reason! Let us get you somewhere safe, and I will work on tightening security and trying to find the assassin. This shouldn’t have happened.”

After a few more moments, she stopped struggling. Although she said nothing more, Garnet slowly nodded in agreement and followed her to a guest bedroom with no windows in the back of the castle. "This room should be safe for now. I will have two guards posted outside the door until I can return and guard it myself." She turned to leave, but stopped noticing that Garnet still stood near the doorway staring off into nothingness. "Will you be alright?" She added softly.

"I'm fine." Garnet answered emotionlessly. "Would she still be alive if I had never become a princess or queen?"

Beatrix placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You are a very good queen. The people are lucky to have you; and I to serve you. Do not ever forget that." With those words, Beatrix turned and hurried from the room attend her duties.

"Thank you." Garnet spoke at last looking up at the ceiling. "I'm just tired of people suffering because of me."

...

A/N: As always, thank you so much to everyone that's taken the time to leave a review! You inspire

me to keep writing! Also, many of you are probably wondering why i chose the name *Mélamar* for the kingdom. *I's an elvish word that i thought was fitting. Let me know what you think! even negative criticism is always welcome.*

10. Winter's Blessing Part 1

A/n: As always, i just wanted to take a minute to say thank you to everyone still reading this story, along with my fellow writers keeping FF9 alive! This chapter is turning out much longer than the other, so i figured it would be better to break it into two parts so you wouldn't have to wait as long for an update. For me, this is one of the more difficult chapters to i've wrote and will mark the end of the first half of the story. I hope you enjoy this first part of the chapter and if you do, please leave a review letting me know what you think!

...

Carefully laying Garnet down on the soft bed, he admired her under the light of the moon that shimmered past the open curtains. He had of course thought she was beautiful from the first time they had met, but somehow, she had become even more breathtaking since he'd last seen her. Her soft pale skin almost radiated against the sharp contrast of her raven hair. For a moment, before the effects had taken their hold, he had seen the recognition in her eyes. The look of shock and betrayal was something

that he had never wanted to see. Even if things had ended differently, would she have ever forgiven him? He supposed it didn't matter now; It was finished. he had done what he'd had to.

The sound of metal-clad boots hammered down the stone hallway toward the room, but he made no effort to flee. Not taking his eyes from her, he pulled the blood drenched blade free and dropped it to the floor. How had it come to this? As the stomping grew ever nearer and shouts of "The assassin was carrying her toward the royal chamber!" joined them, he reached down and gently rubbed her cheek barely noticing the smear of blood he left behind.

"I'm sorry.." He whispered softly. "I never wanted it be like this. I played it over and over in my head a thousand times, but I never thought it would go like this... I just wanted to—" The sudden loud banging against the door finally caught his attention. His time was up. Finally willing himself to look down at her blood-soaked dress, and the puddle that was slowly forming on the floor, he knew the damage had already been done; There would be no coming back from this. Slowly, he made his way to the balcony and carefully climbed on the top of the railing. He looked down at the frigid water that surely meant a frozen grave. At least it would be less

painful than the castle dungeon, he mused. “Why can’t the right thing ever be easy?”

The door burst, and soldiers began pouring into the room. Without another look back, He closed his eyes and leant forward feeling a strange sense of exhilaration as the wind rushed past him and he plummeted downward, weightless until the sharp pain of icy water turned everything black.

...

3 days earlier...

“Have you heard any news from Alexandria?” Zidane asked, propping his elbow on the large oak table and knocking a few construction plans to the floor.

“Would you please be careful?!” Mikoto asked, glaring toward the drawings. “Those are the designs for the new castle, I spent three weeks on those!”

“Sorry.” Zidane mouthed, hurriedly picking them up.

“I’m afraid there have been no more updates on the assassin, my liege. The high council seems to be trying to keep the events as quiet as possible.” A rather thin, bookish man with greying hair replied,

looking down at his notes. “There was talk of one of the other councilmen seeking an apothecary, but it may have been nothing.”

“Thank you, Reginald.” Zidane replied, poorly concealing his annoyance. “I’ve asked u repeatedly to just call me by my name.”

“No, my liege!” Reginald replied, shaking his head with amusement. Before Zidane could reply, he continued. “I’m afraid that would not be proper and would be most inexcusable in the eyes of any royal court!”

Zidane raised an eyebrow at him questioningly, but the man’s cheerful demeanor did not change. “I was asked to help you become more kingly, and by the gods of old, I aim to do that to the best of my ability!”

“Where did you find this guy?” Zidane groaned, turning to Freya.

“I met him a few years back during my search for Fratley.” She replied with a grin. “He is a very wise scholar and a good man, you would do well to listen to him. Not to mention he also holds a seat on the Alexandrian council.”

Zidane groaned again theatrically. “Alright, Reginald. I’m guessing you’re going to get onto me for slouching too?”

Not looking up from the parchment he was reading, Reginald replied “While it is frowned upon by some, a king may slouch or sit as he pleases.”

This surprised him, as Steiner had always reproached him for his manners during their journey. “I assume you will be attending the banquet at the castle?” Freya asked him expectantly.

’Huh? “Zidane asked, surprised.

“Do you ever pay attention?” Freya admonished. “The banquet that Reginald mentioned three days ago?”

“Not ringing any bells, but you know how a feel about us having royal—”

“The one at Alexandria!” Mikoto Interrupted. “Remember? All of the suitors will be there to request the queen’s hand in marriage!”

“Oh yea.” Zidane replied simply, standing up from his chair and walking toward the window. “There’s more important things that need to be done here.”

“Ay, Don’t think we can handle it do ye?” The dwarf grunted.

“Its not that I don’t think you can, its just—” Zidane defended, but this time it was Freya that interrupted him. “You have to stop making excuses. We both know you need to go see her. I think it’s long overdue.”

after a moments hesitation, he turned to her and nodded solemnly. “You’re right.”

“Then shall we pick out your royal attire?” Reginald inquired. “There is a lovely seamstress that lives nearby whom I am certain can make you an outfit worthy of a king!”

“Can we please keep it simple?” Zidane pleaded as he followed the man out the door.

“but of course, my liege! After we are finished, I shall return to Alexandria and await your arrival at the banquet.”

It wasn’t a long walk to the seamstress’s house, and before he knew it he was standing on a slightly raised platform being admired and inspected by both the seamstress and Reginald, who had explained to her what was needed and why.

“Oh no, this will never do.” The older lady shook her head. “Even with my finest garments, you simply must have a proper haircut!”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Reginald added.

“What?!” Zidane exclaimed.

“My liege, you said on the way here that you would prefer that not everyone immediately recognize you. Well, a simple haircut along with the required mask should suffice to both make you appear more noble and obscure your identity from whomever it is you do not wish to notice.”

As much as he didn’t like the thought of having short hair after keeping it pretty much be the same style most of his life, he couldn’t argue the counselor’s reasoning. He peered into the polished tin mirror and ran his hand through his short beard that he now wore. “Can I at least keep the beard? I’ve kind of started to get used to it.”

“Of course!” She replied enthusiastically. “I think it makes you look quite dashing my lord!”

As many of his golden locks fell away, he wondered what Dagger would think of him now.

—Alexandria Castle, The Day of the Banquet

“Your majesty, all of the preparations for the banquet as requested have been finished, and the guests have already begun to arrive.” Beatrix informed.

Garnet looked down at her elegant dress but showed little emotion. “Thank you, Beatrix.”

“Are you feeling well?” Beatrix asked, showing concern. “If I may say so, you have not seemed like yourself lately.”

Not acknowledging her, Garnet adjusted the white delicate mask she had chosen and straightened her pendant.

“I don’t know why the council insisted that it would be better for everyone to wear masks with there still being no sign of the assassin but rest assured Steiner and I will defend you with our lives if anything were to go awry.” Beatrix comforted, smiling warmly.

Garnet nodded, then began to walk out of the room and down the hallway toward the ballroom. “I’m fine; let’s get this over with.”

Upon entering the large brightly lit room, it became obvious that there were far more guests than she had originally invited, and if she had to guess, many more were to come. Laughter and jumbled conversations echoed around the stone walls and servers brought delicacies of many varieties to the large oak tables that lined the room as she made her way to her seat. If everything went as it should, guests would mingle and share idle pleasantries while waiting others who had received an invitation to arrive. Once the majority had had their fill of chatter and she had instructed her advisor start the welcoming speech, the large feast would begin.

Thanks to Quina, Garnet mused, there should at least be no complaints about any of the food. Until he/she arrived at the castle wanting to be the new head chef, food had always looked elegant, but lacked any real flavor. To the dismay of her advisors and others that had discovered her food tastes, she had come to realize that she actually preferred the tavern food that most of the townspeople ate every day. Quina had of course picked up on this right away and had begun to make some of the best dishes she had ever tasted. Just the thought of it made her stomach growl.

Sadly however, she had no plans of eating anything tonight and hoped Quina wouldn't be offended. Because, after the food would come the dance. Under any other circumstances, the dance itself might have sounded fun, even though there would be no one there she desired to partner with, but she knew the real reason for the dance. Most, if not all the men on the floor would either be secretly or blatantly wanting to get close to her. Not because of who she was, but WHAT she was. She'd be a fool to think any of them cared at all about how she felt. The only thing that mattered to them was the throne and the power that came with it. She hadn't wanted it to be like this. Gods knew this wasn't what she wanted; the thought of spending her life trapped in a loveless marriage made her skin crawl and feel sick to her stomach but she had made a promise. She had promised to herself that she would do what was best for her kingdom and like it or not, Alexandria needed the money a wealthy lord would provide. So, once they had all made their proposals, it was up to her to decide between them who would do the least damage as king. That man, regardless of whether she could stomach him would become her husband.

“Are the festivities to your liking, your highness?” Someone asked, jarring her from her

thoughts. As she looked up, she was greeted by a friendly smile and a courteous bow. The top of his face was covered by a mask that faintly resembled a brown owl, but he still managed to seem friendly nonetheless. “I apologize if I startled you. Although I am a member of the Alexandrian council, I do not believe we have been properly introduced. My name is Reginald, and it is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“No, I should apologize; My attention was elsewhere.” Garnet replied, with a practiced smile. “It is a pleasure, Reginald.”

Reginald lowered his voice a bit, so as not to be heard by two nobles standing nearby. “Not all of us on the council are against you, your Highness. The many deeds you have done for your kingdom are not so easily dismissed.”

She looked at him curiously, not quite sure what he was getting at. “Um, Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary, I merely wish to one day see harmony between all the kingdoms of Gaia.”

Again, she smiled, this one coming more easily. “I think that would be a goal we could all hope for.”

“Indeed, it is. If I may be so bold, there is someone I would like to introduce you to after the feast commences. He has been looking forward to meeting you and—”

“There you are!” A man boomed over the chatter of the others, causing the rest of the room to go silent. “It’s been far to long!”

Looking over at the direction the voice had come from, the first genuine smile of the night filled her face. “Uncle Cid!” She exclaimed, getting up and greeting him warmly with a hug. ‘Even with a mask, I would Recognize you anywhere!’ Many that had begun watching the scene quickly lost interest and returned to their own conversations. “I haven’t heard from you in months! I was worried something might have happened to you and Eiko. Have you not received my letters?”

“I am deeply sorry, I fear I have shirked a lot of my responsibilities recently.” The Regent offered, guiltily scratching his beard. “You see, I have been diligently working on the new Hilda Garde IV. Ever since I have... returned to normal, new ideas just popping into my head! Aside from the Invincible, that I would still love to take a stab at, the Hilda

Garde IV is destined to be the most advanced ship ever built!”

Garnet rolled her eyes but couldn't stay mad at him no matter how hard she tried; her uncle truly hadn't changed. “How is Hilda? Will she be arriving soon?”

“She is doing well, though I suspect that Eiko has her at her wits end.” He laughed. “To this day I have never met such a rambunctious child!”

Despite her earlier turmoil, she found herself joining in her uncle's laughter. “That's definitely Eiko.”

“I do wish they could have joined me, but alas Hilda thought it best if Eiko continued her studies in earnest.” He waked with here to the nearby table and picked up a glass of wine. “How have things been here? The reconstructions seem to be going well from what I can see.”

Garnet let out an exasperated breath. If only he had read even one of the letters she had sent him; She didn't guess it mattered now. “Everything has been fine. I'm glad both Eiko and Hilda are doing well. Maybe I will be able to see them soon.”

“Of course, of course!” He replied, taking a deep drink of the wine. “You will always be welcome in our castle. Whenever your duties allow it, you may stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you.” Replied distractedly, “I’m really glad you came.” She would have kept talking to him, and without a doubt his company would be far better than anyone else’s but it was time for the feast to begin so she returned to her royal seat.

She looked toward where Beatrix always stood and found it odd that the general wasn’t there. It worried her a little that the woman she had come to know as one of her dearest friends had left but felt certain that she had only left momentarily to deal with something more urgent and would be back as quickly as she could. Choosing not to dwell on it, she nodded to her advisor and the man quickly managed to quieten the room. He then began the opening speech that had been rehearsed. As expected, there were a few toasts at the end of it, along with a few additions from Cid and other high standing nobles to commemorate the event. As per the council’s recommendation, what had begun as a sort of masquerade for the gathering of her many suitors would now become an annual feast known as Winter’s Blessing.

Keeping in tradition, food was offered to Garnet first, and even though her nerves protested, she accepted it gracefully. She had had no intention of eating, but with all the looks of expectation directed her way, and a hidden glare from her advisor, she lifted the proper utensil and took the first bite. It was of course as delicious as all the other meals Quina had cooked, but she couldn't bring herself to enjoy it. Thankfully, she had gotten very good at faking it. She nodded to the waiter that had delivered her food. "It is magnificent!" she then turned to the guests. "You may all now feast!"

11. Winter's Blessing Part 2

Zidane felt ridiculous. His outfit wasn't the bulky robes that Reginald had assured him that most kings were accustomed to wearing, but just the feeling of the silky material against his skin felt odd. Looking at his reflection he decided it could have been a lot worse. He wore a dark slate suit that was elegant in its material while staying bold with its simplicity. The seamstress had felt sure that even though most nobles likely wouldn't notice him as a king, they wouldn't question his stature. A "fancy" sword hung loosely at his side. He hoped he wouldn't have to test its durability.

"We have arrived." The soldier controlling the small boat stated.

"Thank you." Zidane replied simply. With the large oak doors of the castle just a stone's throw away, he realized just how nervous he was to finally walk in. For once, there would be no question as to whether he would be allowed in; he guessed that was something, but would she recognize him? If so, how badly would she hate him for not coming sooner? Or would she hate him simply for the man

he had become? It had taken a long time, but he no longer looked at himself in shame. For once he almost felt proud of who he was and of some of the things he had done. Would she feel the same?

“Well well, we have come a long way haven’t we?” A voice he had hoped to forget commented merrily.

“Burtrard.” Zidane answered in distaste.

The man in question walked toward him in a velvet green robe with arms outstretched invitingly. “Is that the way to greet an old friend?” He laughed.

“You’re no friend of mine.” Zidane replied through gritted teeth and tried his best to ignore him as he headed toward the doors.

“Now don’t be so bitter. What are friends if not individuals with mutual interests?” Burtrard followed him.

“And what interests would those be?”

“Keeping the queen of this kingdom alive, for starters.”

This time, Zidane did stop and turned toward him fully. “Since when did you care about anything but money?”

Burtrard laughed, his smile never faltering. “I suppose you have me there, but like last time I believe we both have something the other wants.”

“Such as?”

“Walk with me.” Burtrard invited, motioning for him to follow as he walked along the edge of the water.

Zidane decided it was probably better to humor the man and grudgingly joined him.

“There are many prying ears around.” Burtrard commented after a short while. “Though I suppose here is as private of a place as we will likely find.”

“This better not be a waste of time. What is it that I’d want to know?” Zidane growled.

“All in good time Zidane, or do you prefer ‘Your Highness’?” He smirked knowingly.

Zidane did not reply.

“While I am glad that you spared my life last time; this time I require a bit more of a... spendable payment for secrets such of this.”

As much as he hated to say it, and hated making a deal with the man, he had to know what secret he

was holding. “What’s your price?”

“That is rather complicated.” Burtrard mused. “You see, I know all about the new kingdom of Mélar and that you have become its king. I also know that Reginald not only attends Alexandria’s council, but yours as well, no doubt doubling as your spy amongst the council. I even know all about the assassin that killed the queen’s maid.”

“...”

“Normally I find large amounts of Gil line the pockets nicely for this kind of information, but I hunger for something more.”

“Get on with it.” Zidane replied, losing his patience. The feast would likely be over before he got to his point.

“My position in Treno is not what it used to be, your efforts of stopping my assassin no matter how trivial it may have been, did not go unnoticed. So, I want onboard.”

“Huh?” Zidane answered, confused. “Onboard?”

“Yes. I want a seat on your council as well with the title of treasurer. With it, a guarantee that if your kingdom were ever to wage war against Treno, my

land and resources will go untouched. Furthermore, if you are successful in your proposal to her majesty, then my position will remain as it is. Do we have a deal?" He finished no longer smiling.

"So you can steal all of the kingdom's money?" Zidane countered.

"Says the thief to the viscount." Burtrard countered.

"Touche." Zidane conceded.

"No. Despite what you may believe, my intentions are mostly noble. I will take no more for myself than what I am duly owed. If you do not find my information worth our deal, I will even allow renegotiation of our agreement. What say you? I would hurry and decide if I were you, time is of the essence I'm afraid."

Zidane thought it over for a moment and decided that if Burtrard did try anything after he honored their agreement, then he could always be dealt with then. "Alright. You have a deal. Tell me."

Burtrard nodded. "The assassins are here at the feast already."

Zidane scoffed. “Tell me something I didn’t already know. Of course, they’re gonna be there to try to finish the— Wait.” He stopped, taking a step closer as realization dawned on him. “Assassins? More than one?”

“Most certainly. Unless of course you wouldn’t count the Alexandrian Council as more than one?”

He stared at Burtrard for a for a moment, attempting to decipher whether it had been a joke, but he seemed serious. “If the council wanted her dead, Reginald would have—”

’Your naivety astounds me, your highness. “He would have glared, but Burtrard continued.” The council knows that Reginald is a mole. The only reason he still lives is that his death would rouse your suspicion. As for the fool Sibert that does still hold loyalty to the crown, he is likely already laying in a gutter somewhere. No one has seen him the last few days. Either way, rest assured that unless you intervene, Garnet will be dead before the night’s end.”

“How do you know this is true?” Zidane asked but could already feel his pulse quickening and knew that it must be.

“A client of mine was approached by one of the councilmen seeking an untraceable poison, one which is not easily concocted mind you, demanding that it be delivered this morning. Fortunately for you, I had the foresight to instruct him to instead deliver a mix of sleeping weed that appears similar in appearance to the poison, as I was quite certain I would find you here and you would listen to reason. Now, although I have already taken care of the poison, it will be up to you to deal with the mercenary that could be disguised as almost anyone and of course the problem of the council itself... Might I suggest using the devil grass that was meant for her majesty during the final toast before the dance commences? I am told you kept it as a reminder of sorts.” Burtrard chuckled. “What you do is entirely up to you, old friend. However, if you are to take my information as you should, then I suggest you hurry and join the party. One way or another, things are about to get interesting I believe.”

Heart racing, Zidane turned and began to hurry back toward the castle but stopped after a few steps. “I can’t believe I’m gonna say this, but unless you’re lying to me... thank you Burtrard.”

“Keeping your word will be more than thanks enough; I look forward to when we next meet.”

As Zidane approached the guards that barred the door, he reached into his jacket and held out the invitation that Reginald had given him. “Welcome to Alexandria. Her Majesty extends her sincerest greetings to you.” He nodded in acceptance and the guards pushed open the door allowing him entrance.

He had expected there to be quite a few nobles, but as he entered the grand room, he realized he hadn’t prepared himself for so many. Judging by the line of tables and vast amounts of food coming from the kitchen, there had to be at least hundred different nobles if not double that! He tried his best not to let his nerves get to him as he found his way toward a seat at the back table of the room. How in the hell was he supposed to find an assassin in a crowd of so many? Not to mention it wouldn’t be long before the council realized their poison hadn’t worked. He would have screamed in frustration if it would have done any good. There wasn’t time to think things out, when the moment arose, he would just have to be ready to act, consequences be damned.

Looking up, he saw Garnet for the first time since his departure. Even sitting atop her royal seat on the other side of the room with her face partly obscured by her mask, there was no denying her beauty. She was watching the guests thoughtfully and for a

moment he was sure that she was looking straight at him.

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All the guests seemed to be enjoying the feast and despite her earlier reservations about eating, Garnet had soon found that her plate was empty as well. Quina truly was an amazing chef. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a blond-haired man enter the room and walk toward a seat that had been left empty in the back. Watching him for a moment, she noticed that he was dressed differently than most of the nobles she had seen so far but decided it was a nice change from the lavish robes that seemed almost feminine by comparison. A small part of her wondered if it were possible that he was the assassin that Beatrix had warned her about?

Thinking of her friend and trusted general, she looked again to see if Beatrix had returned, but she still saw no sign of her. What was taking her so long?

“Is everything well, your Majesty?” Lenard, a member of her council, inquired walking towards her.

She turned toward him a little quicker than she had planned but answered calmly. “Of course. I just noticed that Beatrix has not yet returned, is everything ok?”

“No worries, the regent of Lindblum was not feeling well so we thought it best if she escorted him back to his airship. She should be returning any moment now. Is there anything else that I can do for you?”

“That will be all.” She replied, assuring herself that she needed to stop worrying. Lenard returned to his seat with the rest of the council, and she turned her attention back to the guests. The man she had noticed before was chatting with one of the waiters about something. Why did he look so familiar? After a while of waiting for the last of the guests to finish eating and letting her imagination wander, she began to feel dazed. She hadn’t slept well in quite some time, maybe it was finally getting to her? She forced her vision to focus, making a silent promise that she would at least try to rest once this was over.

A loud high-pitched pinging caught her attention along with most of the guests after a few seconds. Groggily, she looked toward the table to her right where the council was seated. Braxton, who held

one of the higher seats, had stood and was carefully tapping his wine glass with a metal utensil. She noticed with discomfort that the others on the council, except for the two that seemed to be missing were glaring at her angrily but seemingly trying to hide it. She would have worried, probably should have, but gods she felt exhausted.

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“Ladies and Gentlemen! I have an important announcement!” Braxton exclaimed loudly although the tone in his voice didn’t radiate cheerfulness.

That’s strange, Zidane thought, Reginald had said that Garnet would be the one to announce the start of the dance. “While I am certain that many of you will be greatly disappointed; due to a change in plans the dance will no longer be happening.”

There was mass of disappointed murmurs amongst the nobles, but no one interrupted. “Due to her majesty not feeling well..” He walked over to Garnet who looked barely conscious. Zidane hoped again that Burtrard had been telling the truth. “Plans had to be changed.”

Many in the crowd voiced agreement, while others voiced their concern for the queen. Braxton

held up a piece of parchment and continued. "As you all well know, with every queen there comes a time when they must be wed. Normally each of her suitors gathered here tonight would submit their proposal to the queen one by one. But tonight, as per this royal decree signed by the queen herself, the new king will be decided by the laws of old!"

"And what laws are those!?" A young extravagantly dressed man stood up abruptly. Zidane guessed he didn't like the news.

"Why, a royal duel to the death of course." Braxton smiled. "You may challenge any other suitor you desire; the winner will marry her Royal Majesty Garnet Til Alexandros XVII."

"What?" Garnet asked drunkenly, looking up at Braxton as he draped his arm over her shoulders.

"Relax your majesty, I was just informing the guests of the things we went over earlier. Shall we begin?"

"Oh... Of course." She replied dazedly.

"As a master swordsman myself, I will be partaking in the duels as well. Who shall be first?" He finished with a daring grin.

“You simply must joking!” A snobby woman proclaimed in disgust. “Surely you cannot expect my dear Winifred to participate in such shenanigans! He is a high ranking noble with prime lands near Treno for Odin’s sake!”

“Of course not.” Braxton replied with mock remorse. “I expect him to leave and give up any hope he had of claiming the title of king.”

“I believe this evening was a complete waste anyway!” Winfred countered. ‘I have no desire to be ruler of a kingdom that is so barbaric!’ He then turned to the woman and pulled her arm as he headed towards the door. “Come mother! Let us depart at once! My father will hear of this!”

Zidane shook his head. So, the council’s plan was for Braxton to marry her? He was sure that Garnet had signed no such paper, though she was hardly in the condition to voice any objections now. Something bothered him though, if that was the whole plan, then why the assassin or the request for poison? Maybe Burtrard had been wrong? As much as he wanted that to be true, he doubted it.

A man in a white suit and flowing cape walked toward the center of the room and stopped, facing Braxton. “If zis is how it must be, zen I will be your

first opponent. However, I will of course require a weapon as I did know zat I was to bring my own.”

Braxton nodded to one of the other council members, and moments later a rack of various weapons was wheeled into the room. “Have your pick, Javier.”

As Javier chose his weapon, movement in the corner of the room caught Zidane’s attention. A noble had handed a dagger to one of the guards as they headed back to their post near Garnet! “Damn it!” He breathed as he quickly stood and made his way around the edge of the room keeping an eye on the guard and the two men that had begun to exchange blows while trying not to attract too much attention. From the outset, he could tell that Javier was faster than Braxton but something about the man’s confidence made him wonder if he was moving slower intentionally.

Time slowed as fixated his attention fully on the guard. It was obvious they were waiting for an opening to use the blade, but he has no intention of letting it happen. He still didn’t know exactly how he’d stop them, but he wouldn’t have time to think it over.

There was a sudden gasp from the crowd as Braxton moved unexpectedly swift and stabbed his sword through Javier's chest. This was it! He locked eyes with the assassin guard and neither hesitated. No longer caring if anyone saw him, he drew his own blade and shoved people out of his way rushing to close the distance to Garnet as the guard did the same.

Screams filled the room as he leapt toward her, slamming into the guard that had made it a fraction of a second sooner. Pain shot through him as he felt the knife that had been meant for the woman he loved pierce his side. Blocking out the pain, he lunged his own dagger into the guard's neck sending blood spraying across Garnet's dress. In that moment, he saw clarity and recognition in her eyes as she took in him and the bloody knife he held. "Zidane... Why?..." She muttered before drifting into unconsciousness.

"He's trying to kill the Queen!" Many screamed as he stood and turned toward Braxton. "I know what you've done and what you plan to do. All of it ends today!" Zidane yelled over the crowd as he lifted his sword breathing heavily.

“And who in hell are you?” Braxton replied angrily.

“My name is Zidane Tribal. To some of you I am a hero; To most of you I am a thief and a killer, but to the kingdom of Mélarimar I am its king!”

Braxton lunged at him, but despite the small dagger still lodged in his side, he managed to parry the blow. The room spun as he again pushed himself past his breaking point forcing his blade to keep up with the deranged frenzy of attacks bombarding him. Blow after blow he blocked them with everything he had, thoughts of his own safety or whether he could win never occurring to him. Instead, his mind flashed with images of Garnet and what they would do to her if he didn't stop him. A wave of energy washed over him as he tranced for the first time since they had battled Necron. For the first time that evening a look of fear filled Braxton's features, and he took a step.

“That is impossible! Trance is just a myth!” He exclaimed. Faster than he had thought possible, Zidane knocked the blade from his hand and knocked him to the floor with a thud. He then stood over him and brought the tip of his blade to

Braxton's throat. The man visibly paled and knew he was about to die.

"Give me a reason to kill you." Zidane stated coldly.

"Please.... Don't!" The man choked pleadingly.

Not moving his sword, he looked up at the rest of the council who had cowered in the corner. "I won't kill any of you here... but know this. If any of you or even someone I think you may have hired tries to hurt Dagger, Queen Garnet, again I will hunt you all down and when I'm done with you..."

"That— That won't be necessary!" Braxton stumbled; all traces of his previous confidence gone.

Zidane said nothing more, but after a moment of utter silence filling the room, he stabbed the blade into the oak floor inches from Braxton's head. He turned and carefully lifted Garnet from the throne and began carrying her down the hallway. Knowing their fear of one man even tranced wouldn't last, it didn't surprise him when he heard shouting for the guards to apprehend him. He didn't care. His emotions were too intense. But, as he finally reached her royal chamber, his trance died.

He carefully laid Garnet down on the soft bed, taking a brief moment to admire her under the light of the moon that shimmered past the open curtains. He had of course thought she was beautiful from the first time they had met, but somehow, she had become even more breathtaking since he'd last seen her. Her soft pale skin almost radiated against the sharp contrast of her raven hair. For a moment, before the effects had taken their hold, he had seen the recognition in her eyes. The look of shock and betrayal was something that he had never wanted to see. Even if things had ended differently, would she have ever forgiven him for the things he knew they would accuse him of? He supposed it didn't matter now; It was finished. He had done what he'd had to, though he wondered if he should have killed the councilmen for her while he had a chance?

The sound of metal-clad boots hammered down the stone hallway toward the room, but he made no effort to flee. Not taking his eyes from her, he pulled the blood drenched blade from his side and dropped it to the floor. Not caring that he was barely able to stand. How had it come to this? As the stomping grew ever nearer and shouts of "The assassin was carrying her toward the royal chamber!" joined

them, he reached down and gently rubbed her cheek barely noticing the smear of blood he left behind.

“I’m sorry..” He whispered softly. “I never wanted it to be like this. I played it over and over in my head a thousand times, but I never imagined it would go like this... I just wanted to see you so that I could finally tell you that I love you...” The sudden loud banging against the door finally caught his attention. His time was up. If they captured him now, his threats would be for nothing. Finally willing himself to look down at her blood-soaked dress, and the puddle that was slowly forming on the floor, he knew the damage had already been done; he had lost too much blood; There would be no coming back from this. Slowly, he made his way to the balcony and with the last of his strength climbed on the top of the railing. He looked down at the frigid water that surely meant a frozen grave. At least it would be less painful than the castle dungeon, he mused. “Why can’t the right thing ever be easy?”

The door burst, and soldiers began pouring into the room. Without another look back, He closed his eyes and leant forward feeling a strange sense of exhilaration as the wind rushed past him and he

plummeted downward, weightless until the sharp pain of icy water turned everything black.

12. Light In the Darkness

A/N: I'd like to apologize for leaving you with that cliffhanger, hopefully you didn't dislike it too much. Upon finishing that chapter, I had a clear direction of where I was going to take the story for there. I even finished what would have been the next chapter, but as usual this story seems to have a mind of its own, so I trashed all the plans I had planned on taking with this story and instead somehow found my way to writing this chapter. I hope you enjoy it, and that it will make up for the last one. As always, I want to give a big thank you to everyone still reading this story, it means a lot to me. If you enjoy it or have any thoughts on how I can improve, please message me or leave a review and let me know. I am always open to criticism both negative and positive. Lastly, I need to give a shout out to my fellow ff9 fanfic writers, its awesome to see people keeping such an amazing game alive!

...

Everything was black and yet he could see clearly. Zidane looked down at his hands as he stood in the darkness and could see them as well as if he

had been in a brightly lit room. Taking a quick mental inventory, he felt fine. There was a strange sense of weightlessness akin to floating as he took a cautious step forward, but maybe that was normal here?

“Where am I?” His voice echoed across the empty space. *For that matter, how did I get here?* He wondered. He couldn’t remember anything that might have led to him being where he was now, granted even his strongest memories seemed scrambled. “Is anyone here?!” He called. No answer except for the same echo moments later.

“Am I dead?” This time he didn’t really expect any answer.

“Zidane...”

He quickly span around expecting someone to be nearby as the voice whispered through the air faintly. *That voice... is it familiar?* Not knowing which direction might eventually reveal an exit, he began his walk. Time stood still as each hollow footstep bled into the next. *Has someone or something brought me here? Did I do something to deserve this? Have i—*

Suddenly the floor shifted beneath him, jarring him from his thoughts as if he had been pulled. He barely managed to keep his balance, but when he looked down, the dark floor was unchanged and as empty as before. “What the hell was that?”

In the distance he could hear faint laughter. “Hey! Can you hear me?” There was again no reply, but the laughter continued, along with faint voices. Looking around, he could see a faint light in the distance. Both curious and hoping to find an exit, he hurried toward it. As he drew near, he slowed and had trouble comprehending what he was seeing. “This is... but how?”

He was still there, standing with his feet firmly on the blackness. There was no doubt about that, but there he was... the others too.

“No.” Garnet replied firmly, crossing her arms as Zidane held flowers in his outstretched hand. “C’mon! where’s your sense of adventure?” He grinned devilishly, knowing she’d give in eventually.

“No!” She repeated, taking a step back her eyes showing her fear. She stared up at the large beast crawling quickly overhead. “I am NOT getting on that thing!”

“C’mon, trust me it’ll be fine! You know damn well I won’t let you fall off or anything.”

“Falling off!? What if it decides to EAT us!?”
She squealed, nearing full blown panic.

Zidane smiled as he remembered this had been one of the first times her determination to match his braveness and daring had finally given way to her inexperience.

Feeling bad after seeing her genuine fear for the first time, Zidane lowered the smelly flowers and took a soft toward her, lowering his voice as he spoke. “I know you’re scared, but this really is the only way out of here without turning back. I promise, no matter what if I’m breathing I’ll make sure nothing happens to you. You just gotta trust me.”

She eyed him suspiciously, but part of her fear seemed to subside. “Fine...” She sighed in defeat. “But... can we at least try to get on one of the slower ones?”

“You know, I never got to tell her that I always thought she was braver than I was.” Zidane whispered, as the scene began to fade away. “I wish I had of told her then just how brave she was. No

matter what she was faced with, she never ran away. I wish I could say the same...”

He continued walking, memories slowly making their way back in. “Did Kuja kill me?”

“*Zidane...*”

The voice called again, still too faint to make out who it belonged to. *Why does it fill the room?* He ignored it and continued forward. Without warning, he was jarred off balance again, this time falling to the floor. Though there was obviously nothing anywhere to be seen, he felt as if the whole world trembled and shook violently. It seemed as if even the nothing might break if it continued for long. When it did finally subside, he felt cold. Not that the air had gotten colder but the kind of cold you can feel deep in your bones.

Zidane stood up and rubbed his arms trying to regain some warmth. *Will it be like the first time?* He wondered, looking around. Sure enough, in the distance he could hear something again. “...Is someone crying?”

As he drew near, he saw Eiko sitting against one of the broken walls of Maiden Sari with her legs pulled up to her chest sobbing into her knees. He

began to approach her to comfort her, but saw his past self drop down beside her instead.

“Hey, is everything ok?” Zidane asked softly.

“Just leave me alone!” Eiko exclaimed, trying to hide her tears.

“Why are you crying?” He asked gently, not backing down.

“I’m not crying!” She hissed, angrily wiping at her tears with her sleeve.

“Alright, so you’re not crying because you’re tough, right?” Zidane picked up a pebble and turned it over in his hands.

“I almost forgot about this.” Zidane whispered softly as he watched the memory.

“That’s right.” Eiko replied finally. “Tough people don’t cry; only babies.”

Zidane chuckled and tossed the stone toward the water. “Who told you that?”

“You don’t ever cry.” She countered.

Zidane sighed heavily. “I do if there’s a good reason.”

“Hmph, and what’s a good reason?” She was still being defensive, but at least she was looking at him now. “I think I’d cry if had to leave my home and my friends that I loved. I think that would be very hard, especially if I knew I might not ever even get to see them again. I think that would be a good reason to cry, what about you?”

“Hey!” Eiko exclaimed, beginning to cry again though this time she didn’t try to hide her tears. “That’s not fair, you can’t steal mine!”

“I guess you’re right.” Zidane smiled. “But it’s definitely something you shouldn’t be ashamed to cry about.”

“Thank you.” Eiko replied, wiping away the last of the tears. “But I’m done crying now, I’m gonna go say goodbye to Chimomo!” Zidane watched as she ran off.

“So, what would you cry about?” Garnet asked softly, her sudden question almost making him jump.

“Me?” He asked stupidly.

“Who else?” She laughed.

Zidane got up and walked toward the railing. “I think—”

“Finding that place I could call home.” Zidane finished before it played in the memory. ‘Some home it turned out to be.’ He kicked absently at nothing. “I spend my whole life looking for a place to call home, never realizing that it’s the people you care about that makes it home, not the place you were born.”

Grudgingly, he carried on; not surprised at all when the intense tremors reverberated throughout the darkness again, knocking him around as though he were in the middle of a storm at sea. He braced himself as best he could, wishing there was something, anything to hold onto to. Just as quickly as it started, everything calmed. The cold he had felt before now only intensified and no matter how hard he rubbed his arms, he felt numb with cold. “Why am I so cold?” Not even the echo gave its reply.

A loud clanking rang from distance ahead of him. “I’d recognize that sound anywhere, I just wonder which time it was...” stopping at the edge of the memory, he realized it was one he had completely forgotten.

“Damn you! What have you done to the princess!” Steiner stomped angrily.

“What have I done? You were the one guarding camp!” Zidane countered, not looking up at him as he threw a handful of white flowered plants into their small fire. The knight had done nothing wrong, but any chance to turn the tables on the large man was one he wasn’t going to miss.

“Well I— You... I did nothing to cause this! She was fine earlier!” Steiner stumbled, though if Zidane had been looking at him, he would have seen the genuine guilt spread across the knight’s features as he looked down at Garnet.

She was laying on her traveling blanket with her head propped up, sweating profusely. Occasionally she would mumble something incoherent or toss and turn uncomfortably. “Gods! The princess is dying and it’s all my fault! I should have protected her!” He bellowed in agony, falling to his knees.

“From the mosquitos?” Zidane asked, placing a pot of water over the now steady fire.

“What do you mean, Brigand?” Steiner asked, shaking his fist. “If it was not for you, we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place!”

Zidane sighed. "She'll be fine if you just let her rest. Her fever should break soon."

To this, Steiner showed genuine surprise. "How can you know that? You're not a doctor!"

"Yea, I know. A thief can't be that smart." He waved dismissively. "But I've been around and through a lot of things ur not gonna see couped up in that fancy castle."

As the water began to boil, he tossed in some small green leaves to let them steep. "What is that you are making?" Steiner asked, his tone quietening down.

"We call it poor man's tea." Zidane replied. "It tastes a little bitter, but when she wakes up it'll help her feel better. He expected Steiner to reply in disgust, possibly even pour out the tinted liquid, but his next words were neither." Why is it that you are doing this? What do you have to gain?"

"Huh?" He replied, confused. "What do you mean?"

"You're a Thief, a Brigand. Your type never does anything without some personal gain. But, I see nothing that you could gain from your recent

actions. It is simply to hold her highness indebted to you?"

Zidane looked at him a moment and then at Garnet before answering. "I... I don't know. I don't guess I want anything from her. I told her I'd be here for her, and I meant it. I know you can't stand me, I get that, but I really am just trying to do what I can to help her."

"I hated Steiner for how he always looked down on me." Zidane commented as he watched Steiner move to sit by the fire somberly. "I don't guess I should have blamed him though. He wasn't a bad person; we were just used to living worlds apart." He shook his head and decided to move on.

"Gods, I miss them." Zidane spoke aloud after continuing for a while, he was waiting for everything to start shaking again. "I miss Eiko complaining all the time. I miss Vivi and his wisdom that always seemed much older than he was. Hell, I even miss rusty yelling at me!" As he expected, it happened again only this time he was thrown backwards, hard. Gasping, struggling to breath, he felt like he was being punched in the chest.

"Zidane!.. Please!" The voice was louder this time, and he could feel the urgency behind it. *But*

why? He wondered as everything returned to normal. With surprise, he realized that not only was he numb with cold, but now his clothes were soaked and dripping with water. 'Where did all this water come from?' he tried his best to ring out his vest, but it was no use. Giving up, he plodded forward shivering and leaving a trail of water behind him. "Please, I just want to get warm.."

Up ahead he could see light again. Not caring which memory it would be, he hoped the light would have some warmth. To his disappointment there was none, and with a groan, he wished it would have been almost any other memory.

Garnet stormed off, her face red with anger as Zidane chased after her. "Dagger, please! I didn't —"

"Don't talk to me!" She practically screamed at him as she whirled around. Zidane backed up; he had never seen her that angry before. "You don't understand it was— I had no idea that—"

"That I was standing there!?" She spat venomously. "or that you would love kissing her!?" He took a step back, a pained expression filling his features.

“it’s not like that!” He defended.

“Really?” She asked sarcastically glaring at him. If looks could have killed, he was sure that one would have done him in.

He broke from her gaze and looked down at the ground before replying. “What does it matter? Its not like we’re dating, so why to you care?” He regretted the words before they had even left his mouth.

She tried her best to hide it, but her look of hurt she wore before turning back around and throwing her hand up would have been obvious to anyone. “You’re right, I— I don’t care! Just.. Go back and kiss her! Do whatever you want!”

“I shouldn’t have let her leave then; I should have chased after her and made her listen..” Zidane commented, not longer watching. ‘I didn’t know that girl was gonna kiss me, I honestly wasn’t trying to flirt with her I just saw she needed help. Hell, maybe she was just being grateful, but either way I should have never let it happen and Gods know I never did again.’ He let out a long sigh and looked up into the darkness. “I know I’m anything but perfect, but if this is some kind of hell do I really deserve this?”

He knew whatever it was that kept happening after each memory would come again, but this time he decided to just sit down and wait for it to hit. If he was being honest with himself, more than anything he felt afraid of what the next memory would be. He didn't have to wait long, however. Instead of another tremor or driving force, light blinded his vision and his lungs felt like they were on fire! For the briefest of seconds, he imagined cold wet lips against his own and a strange alien warmth against him. Not a powerful warmth, but something just barely there, slightly warmer than he would have felt without it. As he finally regained his senses, he could still feel a pressure pounding into his chest and an almost numb throbbing pain in his side.

Struggling back to his feet, he suddenly felt overwhelmingly exhausted and had the strangest sensation that he desperately needed to see the next memory and that if he didn't, things would only get worse. It made no sense and was probably completely irrational, but somehow it felt true. So, even with each step cold and painful, he pushed on. As he finally reached it, he collapsed. It took everything he had not to fall asleep, but he would at least make it through this one, even if it killed him.

Unlike the others, this one came from his own perspective. He was back in the castle, staring at Garnet as she lay on the silk sheets covered in his blood from the knife that had torn into his side. *That's why I'm hurting now..* he thought distantly as the events of that night came rushing back to him "I jumped into the water.." He coughed as in his memory he stood teetering on the balcony rail. He closed his eyes, he didn't want to replay this. He waited for as long as he thought it would take for the moment to pass, but when he opened his eyes, nothing had changed; he was still standing on the railing.

As if sensing that he was watching again, the vision resumed and went dark as he had closed his eyes for a moment, but all of the other sensations remained as he leaned forward on the railing. "Zidane!?" A voice gasped as he began to fall. "No!" The same voice screamed as he crashed into the water. Almost forgetting his exhaustion, he felt his heart suddenly pounding in his chest. *I didn't remember this! That voice had to be!* The vision filled the void around him and overwhelmed him as each scene began to crash into him without mercy as thou he were drowning,

For a second there clarity. He could see the castle in the distance, but the water was pushing him further away, he vaguely wondered why the water was moving so quickly, but he didn't have the energy to move... he was so tired. "Zidane, please stay awake!" A voice pleaded as he felt someone struggling desperately against the current beside him. "Oh gods! The waterfall! Hold onto me!" He tried, he really did, but that voice was so far away, and everything was fading to black again.

"Dagger?" Zidane choked in the darkness as it hit him again.

"Zidane! Please, no!.. Gods, I can't lose you again!" He heard her voice again, this time loud and directly above him. He was cold all over and everything felt numb, but somehow, he could still feel it when her lips crashed into his and her ragged breath filled his lungs. He was drowning! He coughed violently expelling water through his nose and mouth as he struggled to fill his lungs with air. When at last he opened his eyes and his vision finally focused a part of him wondered if this was the sweetest of dreams; he saw Garnet leaning over him, her hands still pressing on his chest. Her soaked hair clung to her face in a knotted mess, and her once delicate makeup streaked in small streams

down her cheeks, staining what was left of her torn waterlogged dress. Noticing he was conscious, her exhausted face immediately washed over with relief. “Oh, Thank Ramuh you’re alive!”

13. Aftermath

The next hour felt like hell, if Shiva had frozen it solid that is. Garnet tried to control her shaking as she dropped the pile of sticks she had desperately collected onto the patch of bare soil under the stone outcropping. *How far did the current carry us before I was finally able to drag us to shore?* She tried to take her mind off the numbing cold that prodded its icy fingers deep into her core. *Gods I was reckless... But it was worth it.* She mused as she turned toward Zidane, who was unconscious again but thankfully still breathing. *I'm so tired* She thought hazily as she looked at her trembling arms. Almost every fiber of her being wanted nothing more than to lie down as well and drift off into a deep, comforting, relaxing-.

“No!” Garnet protested aloud, jerking herself upright and scrambling to try to start a fire the way Vivi had taught her. She had never been able to effectively use black magic, but after struggling and stubbornly refusing to admit defeat at making a fire when they were traveling using sticks as Zidane had always done, despite accomplishing nothing more than a few painful blisters, the young mage had suggested she tried using a fire spell. Even that had

been a failure at first, but she had been determined to show Zidane and the others that she could do it. So, she had taken to spending her turns watching the camp at night practicing.

The small wood pile slowly began to smolder, then with careful breaths, finely burst into a small fire. She couldn't hold back the small smile of accomplishment that filled her features. She knew she would never be able to wield fire as Vivi had done, the most she could conjure was barely more than a candle flame, but just being able to hold her icy hands up to the warmth of her small campfire now made all those nights of practice worth it.

As soon as a little bit of color returned to her hands, she hurriedly began to maneuver Zidane closer to the fire. Without him being awake it was hard to judge how close was a comfortable distance to the heat but decided she could move him back further if he started to sweat; for now, he needed heat. Heaving from the exertion and the cold that still gripped most of her, she collapsed onto the ground beside him. Subconsciously moving closer to the man she had just risked everything for, she looked into the fire and tried to ease her racing thoughts. It didn't take too long, because with the warmth of the flames came fresh pain up her left leg.

For the first time since she had dived off that balcony, she mentally took in her condition and let out a surprised and worried gasp. Maybe it had been the darkness of the water masking it, but now it was painfully obvious that the bottom half of her dress was covered in a dark layer of blood. “Gods, I’m bleeding bad!”

She pulled up the bottom of her dress after checking that no one was watching, mostly out of habit, and found that she had grazed her leg badly against the rock. As the cold air hit the open skin of her knee, fresh stabs of pain burned up her leg. She winced as she touched it gingerly. It was raw and still bleeding, but she didn’t think it could have caused that much blood especially that high up. Pulling her dress up higher, she was surprised that she was find she wasn’t injured. She had blood on her skin, but it was—

“Zidane!” She gasped again, feeling stupid. *It’s not just the cold! Oh, gods he must be hurt bad!..*

Rolling him over and ripping away his vest, she tried her best not to let the panic she had felt earlier set in. Even in the dim light of the fire, It only took moments to find where the blood had come from; without the vest to cover the hole in his side, it

began to pour again. Garnet didn't take the time to wonder if she had the strength to heal his wound. There wasn't a choice, she had to be able to. She pushed and pushed, but with her exhaustion, the healing magic wouldn't flow. "No! I WILL heal you!" She forced herself to concentrate even harder and saw the healing aura begin to glow before teetering out again. Looking at him in desperation, she waited to see if there was any change. "Zidane?" He coughed weakly, spitting up blood. For a second, she thought it might have helped, but instead his breathing began to grow more ragged and shallower.

She placed her hands on his wound, refusing to give up. "No! Damn you! You're not going to do this to me! I won't let you leave me alone again! I haven't even been able to tell you that I love you!" Everything she had felt since awakening to him standing on her balcony, looking different and almost elegant in his royal attire but also unmistakably the man she had been unable to let go of and all the emotions she had bottled up since his departure poured out as she tranced.

...

"What is going on!?" Steiner roared at a nearby guard in the main hall as the noble guests pushed

their way out of the castle.

The smaller man visibly gulped beside his iron Helmet. “Um.. Uh.. Don’t you know?”

“Don’t I know WHAT?” He growled menacingly.

“Steiner!” Beatrix exclaimed with relief as she pushed her way through the large doors past the crowd or exiting nobles. It had begun to snow but the time she made it back inside of the castle and tendrils of it still rested on her armored shoulders. Just as quickly as her relief had shown, it was replaced by confusion. “Where is Her Majesty?”

“Was she not with you!?” He yelled over the crowd, much louder than he had planned.

“No. Braxton assured me that you would be standing guard beside her while I escorted the regent!”

This time it was Steiner who was confounded. “No, I was told that you would be protecting her, that it was my job to make sure no brigands interrupted the feast!”

“Damn it!” Beatrix exclaimed, pounding her fist against the door and pushing her way toward the courtroom. “How could I have been such a fool!”

Through the shouts of the leaving crowd, she only managed to catch a few words: “Assassin” ‘Murderer’ and even worse “Dead”. Her heart pounded as she desperately tried to make her way inside. *Please still be alive!* She pleaded silently. *I will never forgive myself for this!* Finally pushing past the door, her heart sank. Garnet’s throne was empty.

She had always prided herself with her ability to stay cool in heated situations, but as she caught sight of Braxton straightening his collar, she charged at him. “Braxton! What have you done!? If anything has happened to her majesty I will—”

“You will do what?” Braxton replied coolly. “Disobey another order?” Another councilman added.

“What?” She replied, dumbfounded.

“You were specifically ordered to guard your queen with your life!” Braxton sneered.

“But I! No, I was-!” She tried to defended herself, but stopped. “Tell me where she is!” She screamed.

“While you were off skirting your duties, an assassin stabbed her, carried her up to her royal

chambers, and threw both of them off the balcony and into the river!” He hissed.

“No...” Beatrix gasped, all rational thought crashing onto the floor like a porcelain mug. She shoved Braxton roughly out of the way and ran as fast as she could toward the royal chambers. The sight that greeted her caused her to take a step back. “It cannot be...” A pool of blood dripped from the bed to the floor, a clear trail of crimson footprints leading to and onto the balcony. A torn piece of dress lodged in a crack on the railing telling the final tale. She was too late. “Gods, How could I let this happen!?” She had failed her!... *I have constantly scorned Adelbert for not being vigilant enough, but it is I that have failed her!...*

Stay calm! She desperately willed herself, trying to think of any other possible scenario that could have happened. *The river! Maybe she is still alive!* Peering over the balcony, she felt slightly relieved that there were no rocks down below but cursed herself at have powerfully the river had picked up current in the spa of a couple hours. “I will not rest until I find you, your Highness!” she yelled out over the balcony.

“I’m afraid you will have to come with us, Beatrix.” A soldier said gravely. She whipped around and saw with exasperation that a large group of soldiers stood near the doorway. “What is the meaning of this!? And you are supposed to address me as General, I have already—”

“You are no longer a general.” Braxton interrupted her from behind the crowd of soldiers, sounding pained though she was sure it was an act. “You are under arrest for treason, for aiding in the Queen’s murder, and have been sentenced to a public execution. Please come quietly, I don’t want this to be any more unpleasant than it has to be. Have you not caused enough bloodshed as it is?”

She stood unmoving for a moment, struggling to process what was happening. “You can’t be serious!” she exclaimed. “I had nothing to do with this— with what you’ve done!”

Braxton sighed, this time she wasn’t sure if it was genuine or not. “I’ve ever only done what was best for the kingdom. That is all. If you do not come quietly, we will have no choice but to take you to the dungeon by force.

She laughed. How much worse could things get? “I’ve killed hundreds in combat, and I fight you all

if you try to stop me from finding the Queen!” She reached for her sword and realized with dismay that she had dropped it in her flight to get here. “Can you truly hope to do so without your sword? Please, come quietly, the law might even grant you a measure of mercy if you admit to failing your duties for some personal reason perhaps?”

She clenched her fists tightly and wondered how many she would be able to fight off empty handed. With a sigh and clenched teeth, she finally conceded. “You will pay for this, for what you have done this day.” As she was led by the soldiers toward the dungeon, she saw Braxton from the corner of her eye, grinning in satisfaction. *Yes, you will pay for this.*

...

Garnet groaned as the shined brightly into her eyes as she struggled to open them. Groggily, she rolled off the pillow her head had rested on and felt something cold and unyielding beneath her. Her eyes snapped open and she sat up quickly as she remembered where she was. The sun had broken over the trees and it was morning now.

“It’s morning already? But I was—” The events that had happened right before she had tranced and

passed out, flooded back to her and she quickly turned back around towards Zidane. The “pillow” she had been laying on had been his bare chest. Despite the situation, she felt herself blushing furiously. Thankfully, he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. A part of her had expected/hoped for him to be awake but she guessed it was good he wasn’t able to see how badly she was blushing, or how she was looking at him for that matter.

Guiltily, she ran her fingers along the scars on his chest. There were a lot more of them than she remembered; the large one near his heart pained her the most. *What has he been through since he left? How close had she been to losing him?* She gently trailed her hand up to his cheek and held it there. His facial hair had surprised her, even made him almost unrecognizable from a distance, but oddly she found that it suited him. But more than that, unlike so many nobles those last few months, she thought he looked very attractive and found herself fighting not to blush again. It wasn’t that he looked that much better than the nobles that had tried to court her, many of the women would probably say that she had horrible tastes, but to her he was just more.. raw. She thought maybe that was the right word; everything about him just seems more genuine. And that was

saying nothing for his character. Yes, according Beatrix and she supposed she had no choice but to admit it to herself too, she was more than a little smitten.

“Is this heaven?” Zidane asked hoarsely, almost making her jump. “Cause you have to be an angel.” He tried to chuckle but ended up coughing painfully.

“Shut up.” She replied, breaking into a small smile. It didn’t last though as she noticed his pained expression. “Are you ok?”

He looked at the ground solemnly. “Dagger..” He didn’t continue for a moment, as if searching for the words. She didn’t interrupt him, instead choosing to let him continue when he was ready. “I’m sorry..”

She shook her head in dismissal. “You would have done the same thing for me, and you have, more than once.”

“Not just for this... I shouldn’t have left you.”

“It’s ok.” She replied, not looking at him. Zidane reached out and placed his hand on top of hers. ‘No, it isn’t, and I know I can’t change it, but I hope one day you’ll be able to forgive me.’ When she didn’t move or make any reply, he gently moved his hand to her cheek and turned her towards him. It was then

that he realized she was crying. “Dag, i—” He winced as she punched him in the shoulder, not once but again and again. Not knowing how to comfort her, he wrapped his arms around her and ran his hand gently through her hair as she cried. He smiled to himself as he felt her return his embrace. “I love you too.”

She didn’t reply for a while, not that he needed her to. It was obvious now how she felt about him, he just wondered how he could have been so blind for so long. “How did you survive?..”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“I had to live.”

“I wanted to come home to you.”

“So...”

“I sang your song.”

“Our song.” Garnet corrected, wiping away the last of her tears.

“We’ve really made a mess of things, haven’t we?” Zidane chuckled lightly.

“Yea.. We have.” She replied, looking up at the warming sun.

“I think.. Maybe together, we can handle it.” He replied, taking her hand in his as he struggled to his feet. For the first time since his departure, he saw the warm smile light her features he had so often dreamed about. “We can.”

....

A/n: Well, this is officially the first romance chapter I’ve written since “A more simple life.” Hopefully practicing on that short story has made this chapter feel a bit more genuine. If you have the time, please review and let me know what you think! Even negative criticism might further me to becoming a better writer.

Also, if you haven’t done so, check out “Off Duty” and “The Last Cherry Blossom.” Both are amazing stories with very talented writers. I say that not because they’ve commented on this story, but because they, and writers like them that take the time to bring the characters to life are what’s keeping this game alive!

14. Awaiting Execution

“W— where do we go from here?” Garnet asked, trying desperately to block out the cold as she looked back toward the castle and shivered. Zidane had insisted that she wear his jacket, but damp as it was it did little to cut the frosty winds.

“I’m not sure it’d be a good idea to go back to the castle after what happened, but what do you think?” Zidane replied, wincing in pain as he moved to stand beside her.

As with most things lately, it wasn’t an easy answer. Part of her wanted nothing more than to hurry back and demand that Braxton be removed from his position and exiled so that he could never set foot in Alexandria again, but her more rational side knew that it wouldn’t be that simple.

She had known for a long while now that most, if not all, the Council had been plotting to get rid of her. Whether it was marrying her to someone they wanted to be in control, or even going so far as to hire an assassin themselves. Either way, she had known something was bound to happen at the feast, so under Beatrix’s advice and admittedly more than

a little paranoia on her part, she had chosen to wear an enchanted necklace that had been a prize of her mother's instead of her usual royal pendant. It wouldn't have saved her life if she had been mortally wounded, but what it had done was lessen the effect of the sleeping weed she had ingested during the feast.

She had to admit that that particular plant had been the last thing she had expected to have to endure. Her mother, being far more paranoid than she could ever claim to be, had ordered the necklace to be crafted with magic that would stop almost any know poison. Combating sleeping weed, however, had never been its intended purpose. Thankfully. It had done enough to keep her mostly conscious during the night's events, only succumbing to its effects for a few moments before waking to Zidane standing atop the balcony railing.

Though she had been unable to react while fighting against an overwhelming desire to sleep, she had heard most of the conversation that night. "I — I don't think it would be a good idea either." She chattered, hugging herself and letting out a small whimper as another cold breeze swept through the valley. "They're p-probably looking for us already."

“I take it it’s not going to be a rescue party.” Zidane groaned, shaking even worse than she was with his bare arms exposed to the elements. Garnet shook her head solemnly, not meeting his gaze. Even without seeing her eyes, she couldn’t hide the emotional pain she felt. He couldn’t imagine what it must have felt like, so he chose not to press. ‘Then maybe we should try going through the north gate and see if we can make it to Dali. From there, we can try to get some supplies and figure out what to do next.’ At first, Garnet did not say anything in return, but after a moment of continuing to stare in the direction of the castle, she nodded in agreement. “I hope Beatrix and Steiner will be ok...”

He wanted to tell her that they would be fine. That together they would be able to stop the council before anything bad happened to anyone but, lying to her had never come easy. “I know I always gave Rusty a hard time, but he’s tougher than most and I’m sure he’ll look after Beatrix too. He tends to be very protective of the people he cares about. I can’t imagine how he’d be with his own wife.” He finished, remembering how many times the knight had tried to pummel him for getting too close to Garnet.

To his surprise, she turned toward him suddenly with a puzzled look on her face. “How did you know about Steiner and Beatrix’s marriage? We kept everything very private.” She narrowed her eyes at him with a challenging expression.

“Uh..” He scratched the back of his head sheepishly and began to walk toward Dali. “Lucky guess?”

She wasn’t buying it. “Now that I think about it, how did you sneak into the castle?” He may have imagined it, but for a second, he could have sworn he saw her fighting back a grin.

“I didn’t, you invited me.” He answered simply, not looking at her.

“W-what?” She asked in genuine confusion as she hurried to keep up with him. “If I had known you were still alive I would have—”

“You did invite me, you just didn’t know it was me.” He interrupted apologetically. The pair trekked on in silence for a while as she digested the information and tried to figure everything out. Seeing her calculating expression from the corner of his eye, he remembered just how much he had

missed talking to her. “You were one of the suitors using a different name? But why?”

“Nope, I wasn’t one of the suitors. Try again.” Zidane laughed, feeling genuinely happy for the first time in a long time. He had always loved the light teasing that they had often shared.

“Zidane..” Garnet replied firmly, stopping in the snow behind him. She wanted answers. Zidane dropped his gaze to the snowy ground and stopped, turning to face her.

“I told you before in Memoria, if I got the chance to propose to you, I’d do it the right way when it’s the right time... we both know that wouldn’t be at some ball or party I know u didn’t even want to be at.”

Her expression softened and he immediately recognized that look, he had seen it quite a few times near the end of their journey together. It was one he could definitely get used to. “But if you weren’t a suitor then how did you— Wait!” She stopped herself, eyes widening as she backed up a step taking in his attire. The letter she had read from the supposed King of *Mélamar*, now seemed almost too familiar. “I got a letter not long ago, but it was

from— No, but that would mean that you..” She spluttered, trailing.

Zidane shifted uncomfortably. “Yea... according to Freya, Mikoto, Vivi and a few others, I guess you could say I’m a king now.”

“...H— how?” Garnet whispered softly, not taking her eyes from his.

Zidane closed the distance between them and gently took hold of her upper arms. “There’s something weird goin on and I’m not entirely sure what it is. There’s so much... so many things I need to tell you and I can try to explain more of it when we get to Dali, but I guess the short of it is something like this: Somebody out there is planning something, and I think it’s a lot bigger than just taking your throne. Whoever it is, has already tried to kill you more than once but I couldn’t let that happen... On my way here I found out that a lot of innocent people, Including Freya, were locked in a dungeon below Cleyra that I never even know existed. I wanted so bad to come back to you and keep the promise I made you, but they needed someone to help them, and I couldn’t just leave them on their own...” He trailed off for a moment, lost in

his thoughts but Garnet waited patiently for him to continue.

“From there the only place I knew to go was back to the Black Mage Village.” He chuckled tiredly to himself. “I guess the word somehow got out that it was a pretty safe place to live cause it didn’t take long for more people to find us that wanted to live there and they needed a leader...” He paused again, struggling to find the right words. “I thought they should have picked somebody better than me, but Freya and the others wouldn’t take no for an answer... I’m so sorry I didn’t make it back sooner.. I just... I wanted to be better for you.”

Zidane raised his gaze back to hers, and to his surprise saw tears running down her face. Before he was able to instinctively ask her why she was crying, her velvet lips crashed into his.

One Week Later...

“Ugh...” Beatrix groaned as she lifted her head from the damp filthy concrete of the dungeon cell. What she wouldn’t have given for a bed! She wondered, staring up at the ceiling for a while before pushing herself to a sitting position. Outside she could hear water dripping from the melting snow and an occasional plop as a larger piece of snow

broke free from the castle wall underneath of the morning sun.

Sliding over a bit, she relished in the warmth that came from the bright rays that snuck through the bars of the tiny window that adorned her otherwise empty cell. She supposed most other kingdoms probably had at least a few modest advancements in their dungeons that made them slightly more livable, but as she turned her attention back to the grimy drain in the middle of the floor, she had recalled how Queen Brahne had insisted that the people they threw in the dungeons were no better than rats, and they deserved to live like it.

“If I somehow make it out of here, I shall endeavor to at least add a chamber pot to each of the cells...” She mused softly in a detached sort of way. “I think perhaps I’ll even treat Steiner’s soldiers better... maybe even learn their names and try to make our groups work better together...”

After a moment, Beatrix laughed bitterly and struggled to sit up against the cold stone wall. Who was she kidding? She no longer had the energy to stand, let alone escape. She was to be publicly executed and with Braxton now king, you could bet her execution with be swift.

“That vile bastard.” She coughed weakly.

Even though Garnet had always spent most of her days constantly hurrying from one duty to the next, a level of determination that had always made Beatrix proud, Braxton seemed to have no trouble finding the time to personally deliver her daily meal that consisted of barely enough stale food to keep the rats alive. He seemed to take great pride in watching her guzzle the dirty water that she had no choice but to accept in her state of dire thirst.

From the first day, the vile man had had no qualms about dismissing the guards and outright bragging about his victory. She would remember that conversation even in her grave...

“Well, Well, Well! If it isn’t the mighty General Beatrix fallen from grace.” Braxton smiled as he waled toward her cell, being careful to stay out of arms reach of the bars.

“You!” Beatrix seethed, jumping up and grabbing the cell bars angrily.

“Now, is that any way to treat your king?” He taunted raising an eyebrow.

Beatrix recoiled, not taking her eyes from his as she attempted to discern his meaning. “What did

you just say?”

“And I thought it was supposed to be that buffoon Adelbert Steiner that was supposed to be the fool. Have you truly not figured it out yet? Now that the Garnet Imposter is out of the way, I am your king now. At least I will be once the coronation is concluded tomorrow.”

“You? The king of Alexandria?” She laughed in disbelief.

“Who else?” He countered. “I was meant to be king! Not only do I hold powerful allies in Treno, but no one on the council has devoted their life to this kingdom the way that I have. I will be the greatest king that has ever graced Alexandria’s throne! Mark my words, even the might Lindblum will tremble before my rule.”

“No one would ever follow your rule!” Beatrix spat.

Braxton’s grin faded, as anger flashed in his eyes. “You think so? Unfortunately for you, they already are! The Council has already accepted me as the next rightful king! Despite what you may think, people need a strong ruler that’s willing to do whatever is ‘Necessary’ to steer this sad excuse of a

kingdom in the direction it should have been heading all along!” Instead of Handing her the tray of food, he slung it angrily against the bars scattering its contents across the room. He then turned and started to leave.

“Her Majesty is twice the ruler you could ever be.” Beatrix commented sourly.

“Shut your wretched mouth, wench!” He yelled, whipping back toward her and stomping to her cell. ‘That bitch of a queen, barely more than a whelp, wasn’t even royal blood! Even one more day of watching her pretend to be a queen and masquerading around the throne would have been more than this heart could take!’ He clenched his fist over his chest and shook his head in mock disappointment. “She would still be alive if only she had been selling flowers on the corner somewhere, living in the streets where she belonged.”

“Her Majesty is still alive!” Beatrix screamed at his retreating form as he made his way up the stairs and out of the dungeon leaving her in the darkness of her cell alone.

Beatrix had wanted to curse, scream and kill the man for everything he had done! Instead, she held it together and sat back quietly in her cell. No matter

what, a General was supposed to stay composed. She had hoped she would never see him again, but the next day at about the same time there he came again. She had expected more taunting or gloating at her expense, but his somber expression caught her off guard.

He approached her more slowly this time, making no comment at first and she eyed him suspiciously as he looked around at the metal bars. "I am sorry that these cells aren't more accommodating, I cannot imagine how uncomfortable you must be."

"Whatever it is that you came here to say, be done with it and leave me alone." Beatrix replied. As much as she hated being all alone in the cold damp room, she vastly preferred it over having to be anywhere near the man.

"I don't suppose I blame you for your countenance, I must admit I was a bit harsh yesterday." He apologized, seeming almost sincere in his pained expression. "I was wrong, it was rude and disrespectful for me to talk of the late queen in such of a manner, gods bless her soul."

"What?" Beatrix asked, tiredly rising to her feet and walking toward the door of her cell. "I told you the queen is—"

“I’m afraid her body was found this morning, washed up on the banks of the river past the waterfall.” He interrupted softly.

“That’s a lie!” She countered, though she felt her heart sinking no matter how hard she tried not to believe him.

He merely shook his head as a parent might at a stubborn child. “As much as I felt distaste towards her, no one deserves to die at such a young age... it truly is a tragedy. Had it not been for the cold and the knife in her chest, perhaps things could have ended differently.”

Beatrix said nothing and only stood there, lost in the enveloping silence.

“Here is your food...” he offered, sliding it gently under her cell. “Perhaps in time we can move past this foolishness and perhaps you will even consider finding redemption in serving me as you once did the late queen.”

“I would gladly die before I serve you.” She replied softly, numb to the room around her.

“If that is what you wish.” He nodded in acceptance. “But do you not desire freedom?”

For a moment, she did lock eyes with him. “Freedom is lost the moment you bow to someone undeserving... Alexandria’s freedom was lost with our queen. If I were to escape this cell, it would only be to put a blade in your throat.” For a moment she thought his face paled, but he turned from her quickly and left the dungeon.

“Was it true?” She asked herself as she looked down at her trembling hands. There was no denying the blood that had covered the royal chamber and the strip of dress lodged in the crack of the railing. Had the queen, her closest friend, fallen to her death? Or had she been dead before she hit the water?

Beatrix sank to her knees and grasped the bars tightly. She was overwhelmed with guilt and self-blame, sadness for the loss of her queen, loneliness at being trapped in her cell, and a deep burning hatred for the new king. She wanted to strangle Braxton for all that he had done, but mostly she wanted to scream. So, she did. She screamed till her lungs were sore and her throat burned from the effort, and she was too hoarse to continue.

The next few days had been a blur. Braxton had come and went but his words had fallen on deaf ears,

the food he delivered left untouched. All she felt was a detached existence, teetering between her own thoughts and her cold dark reality. It wasn't because she was trapped in the dungeon; as a seasoned General she had been trained most of her life for this possibility and knew that she could handle it for months if the need required. And yet here she was only few days later, feeling like a shadow of her former self.

“Is this repayment for all that I've done while serving Queen Brahne? I should not have followed orders that I knew to be wrong... and more than anything I should have been there to...” She trailed off for a while, lost in her thoughts. “This is what I deserve.”

“Come to your senses, have you?” Braxton asked, jarring her back to reality. She hadn't even heard him walk in. Was this how Garnet had felt after the death of her mother?

“Still not talkative I see.” Braxton commented simply. She made no move and did not look at him. “Pity.”

He walked towards her and placed his hands on the cold steel. “Your execution is tomorrow. The council wants to see you hanged for your crimes, but

if you cooperate with me, I will see to it that you get the guillotine; it is much faster and far more painless.”

“Cooperate?” She asked hoarsely after a time.

“Yes. It seems that fool of a captain, Adelbert Steiner, has been missing for some time and we believe he may also be to blame for the death of the queen. Perhaps you know where he might be? Hmm? I hear the gallows can be quite an unpleasant death if things don’t go smoothly...”

This jarred her from her dark thoughts. “Steiner is missing?”

Braxton sighed in frustration. “That is what I said. I believe he has been missing since the celebration.”

“Steiner is still alive...”

15. The Execution

“I still can’t believe you actually came to us for help!” Cinna exclaimed as he eyed the knight.

“Yea, a few years ago you would’ve died before choosing to be around people like us.” Blank added, looking down at his ale.

“Ever since my time of traveling with Zidane, I’ve been forced to... reevaluate the way that I judge people.” Steiner replied, not looking up from his own large mug that was nearing empty.

“What do you mean?” Marcus asked, swirling what was left of his ale in the bottom of his mug.

The four men were seated around an old oak table of a small bar nestled in the poor district of Alexandria. It was the type of bar Steiner wouldn’t have dared step foot in a couple years prior, with most of its patrons being of the lower class and few of them having jobs then even resembled something legal, but even that no longer bothered him.

“I had always thought that it was our upbringing that made us who we are.” Steiner took another deep swig of his ale. “but now I’ve learned that it isn’t

always true. I no longer believe are born good or bad. Instead, I think people should be judged based on their actions and intentions. Much of the lower class are simply trying to survive the best way they know how and even thieves such as yourselves can sometimes be noble enough to even be considered knights. Then there are others born wealthy that pretend to be noble and in truth conspire in the vilest of acts.”

“Damn, you really have changed.” Marcus commented, spreading butter on a piece of toast.

“You’re gonna make me tear up.” Cinna added, wiping his eye.

A waitress approached the table asking the group if they would like a refill on any of their drinks, but she was quickly dismissed. They all agreed that they had had more than enough. Despite the situation and the stress that had been building to a boiling point, none of them could afford to be hungover in the morning.

“I still feel that I should not have left the castle... what if I could have stopped them from capturing Beatrix? And Her Highness...”

“Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself.” Blank comforted. “There’s nothing you could have done by yourself except end up in that damned cell beside her.”

“That doesn’t stop me from feeling like a coward.” He sighed. “Beatrix had suspected the council of such treachery for months now, but as I have so often done In the past, I refused to believe what was right in front of me. Had I just listened to her and ignored the council’s orders, Her Majesty would still be safe and Beatrix would not be in this situation.”

“I’s serious, If THE Beatrix couldn’t do anything, what do you really think you could have done?” Marcus offered.

“Besides if you’re right about what you saw then I’m sure Dagger is safe anyway.” Blank added, tearing off a piece of bread as well, having eyed Marcus devouring his. “But are you sure it was him?”

“I am certain.” Steiner replied, frowning at his own meagre meal consisting of a stew filled with dark colored meat. “He was much different than I last saw him, but I saw his tail when he tranced, and

I do not believe anyone else would have defended Her Majesty in such a way.”

“Then they gotta be somewhere, we won’t stop till we find them!” Cinna smiled

“I only hope that you are right.” Steiner replied, finally looking up at the others. “As much as it pains me, reason dictates that there is nothing I can do to help Her Majesty and can only hope that she truly is safe somewhere with Zidane. However, I could not live with myself if I stood by and did nothing while Beatrix is executed for a crime she would never commit.”

“And that’s where we come in.” Blank nodded to him. “We’re gonna do our best to make sure it doesn’t happen, but it sure as hell won’t be easy.”

“I still do not understand how we will even begin accomplish such a feat.” Steiner spread his hands pleadingly. Blank was sure he was the only one who noticed the older man shaking.

“We’ll get her back.” Blank said quietly. “We can do this; You’re just gonna have to make one hell of a distraction.”

Steiner chuckled humorlessly. “That should not be too difficult, I am a wanted man now after all.”

He shook his head and drank the last of his ale. “I spent almost all my life serving the law and abiding by it. I hated anyone that didn’t do the same. Now it seems they want my head more than any criminal I’ve ever stopped. I don’t suppose breaking more laws now would make any difference. If it will help free my wife, I will do whatever needs to be done.”

“I can see why the boss likes you.” Marcus laughed, easing the tension in the room. “Can we get some more bread over here? Don’t forget the butter!”

....

Dawn broke over the clay rooftops that lined the edge of Alexandria as guards began to assemble the gallows in the town square. Executions were normally done quietly behind the castle if the prisoners weren’t simply left to rot away inside the dungeon. However, the newly crowned king Edrick Braxton the 1st, had personally requested that this execution be one that all of the city witnessed, so that all might know what happened to the likes of traitors of Alexandria.

The news that Queen Garnet was dead came as a shock to everyone as she had quickly become beloved by many, if not all, of the lower and middle

class. A great number of people who had for decades resented the throne had found new hope in the young queen, but that hope was dashed as the morning paper had quickly circulated the city the day after the banquet.

“Queen Garnet Til Alexandros the 16th Assassinated, General Beatrix to blame”

The news that the general had committed the treason that lead to the death of the queen had come as a shock for most, but others recalled the many crimes she had committed under the rule of Queen Brahne and felt that it came as little surprise. Either way, it was an event that no one wanted to miss. Most shops did not open that morning except for a select few that wished to capitalize on the fact that many in soon to be large crowd would no doubt be hungry or thirsty.

As the crowds slowly began to trickle into the town square that morning awaiting the prisoner’s arrival, a cloaked man dismounted tiredly from his chocobo and helped his partner step down before tethering their bird to a nearby post. Chocobos were generally to be left sheltered at the stables, and while there was a chance someone would attempt to steal

the bird from the almost deserted slums, it was a chance they felt had to be taken.

“There’s no going back if we mess this up, is there?” The quiet question was asked with no answer expected or given. He watched from the corner of his eye while double checking his gear as she ran her hand delicately along its neck, silently bidding the bird goodbye if things went sourly.

Being careful not to attract the attention of the numerous guards that now patrolled the city, the pair made their way down the alley that housed Ruby’s mini theater. Apparently there had been quite a bit of drinking the night before and they watched as three different patrons stumbled up the stairs and down the alley. The men paid no heed to the two figures standing against the stone walls of the alleyway until finally they passed out of sight. “We have to be careful.” The man commented, pointing to a wanted poster with his face on it. His partner nodded solemnly in agreement, her face stone serious. He began to walk away but hesitated after a few steps, only to turn back and rip the poster from its rusty nail. She smiled at having guessed him correctly but said nothing as they adjusted their cloaks and slowly pushed their way into the now large crowd.

They had one chance. Either they succeeded, or they would end up on the gallows right beside her. If they weren't killed on the spot that is. Part of him doubted that they had a chance in hell of pulling it off, so many things could go wrong, but as he felt her squeeze his hand in reassurance he felt better.

...

Beatrix groaned weakly, covering her eyes as light flooded into the dungeon. The sound of metal boots coming down the stairs pounded into her senses. So, this was it then? She wondered.

“Well... I think we both know why I'm here. Wouldn't you say so Beatrix?” Braxton drawled, squatting in front of her cell. She made no reply to him, but with a groan pushed herself into a sitting position. She no longer cared or paid attention to his words directed to her. At the moment she just wanted to be rid of her cell, even if it only meant walking to the gallows. The last night had been spent thinking about all the things she missed the most. She missed the mundane walks around the castle at night, making security was uptight and keeping the poor excuses for guards in check. She missed the conversations shared with the young queen as she tended to her duties long into the night.

Sometimes they were serious matters, other times lighthearted banter to ease the stress of the day. She even missed the way prisoners would yell in protest as she walked down the stone corridor between cells which was now only a few feet away. Mostly however, She missed Steiner.

The loud boisterous man had quickly grown on her in ways she hadn't expected. She had at first thought him a bumbling oaf who had been poorly chosen for his position as captain, barely better than the misfits he commanded. However, he had proven to be the opposite of her first impression. Quiet and thoughtful a great deal of the time, it was both surprising and humbling. More than that, he saw her as a person. He was able to look past the many scars she wore from her years of service and through the many layers of both physical and mental armor that she had trouble shedding to the woman underneath. If he had asked her to marry him a few years ago, she would have laughed at him and called him a fool, now she often felt that it was her that was not worthy but was thankful that not all things were measured by your worth and despite her current situation, being dragged up the steps and into the morning light on the day of her execution, she felt

her heart warm at the thought of her husband along with something else..

Was it hope? It had been so long since she had had any. Ever since the day she had slaughtered the Bermecians and Cleyrans alike, the faces of her victims had haunted her every night that she closed her eyes. “What have I done?” She asked herself again and again. Steiner had tried to comfort her, insisting that she had merely been following orders and that he would have likely done the same in her position. But he hadn’t, had he? She reasoned. It had been her. Even knowing that she kept her sword and uniform spotless, she would often look down at it expecting the blood to still be there. How many had she killed with that blade? Most days she was able to bear the pain of it, but at night the seams of her confidence would come unglued and the memories felt as fresh as the day they happened. No matter how hard she tried, it seemed her failures quickly follows and as she was dragged closer to the gallows with two guards on either side, she couldn’t find it in herself to resist. Weakened as she was, she could have probably still pulled loose of the guards and have made a run for it, but a part of her felt that maybe this was the judgement she needed. This day,

all of the crimes she had committed and all of her failings would be brought to justice.

Hands tied behind her back, she stood stoically and with as much dignity as she could muster. She had accepted this fate, but if it was the one she was to suffer she would not give Braxton the pleasure of seeing her broken any longer. She would stand tall and face it head on as Steiner had always done. *Steiner...*

“Welcome all!” Braxton greeted the crowd as he climbed the wooden stairs of the platform that was almost head high and had been constructed solely for her execution. It had been built big enough for him to pace back and forth in front of her as she stood over a trap door that would fall open once the pin had been released, ending her life with the tightening of a knot. Turning the platform into his own stage, Braxton greeted everyone as though it were an exciting festival.

“What a beautiful morning it is, would you not agree?” He asked loudly. The crowd roared in approval.

“The clouds overhead are beautiful... this town, this kingdom of ours and I dare say... You! All of

you! Are such beautiful people! I am honored to be your rightful king!” The crowd roared again.

After the cheers had died down, he made a show of feigned remorse. “Unfortunately, we must not ignore that there is a stain that mars this day!” Motioning to Beatrix who continued to stare straight ahead, he continued. “Once the most trusted defender of the throne, She now stands before you a traitor! Not only is she responsible for the death of your beloved queen, but even after such a heinous crime she was not done! Oh no, She had plans in motion to deceive us all!”. The crowd grew completely silent.

“What was this plan you ask?..” Braxton asked, lowering his voice for effect. ‘Why, she found another, not even of this kingdom, who just so happens to look almost identical to the late queen! Her dastardly plan was to bring forth this “Copy” and present this unknown woman as the queen in her stead!” There was a collective gasp from the audience. “This mystery woman would no doubt be an uneducated girl that she would have wittingly controlled from the shadows!” The crowd began to grow angry and Braxton grinned as one of the guards checked the soon to be late general’s bindings.

From underneath the helmet Blank locked eyes with Beatrix. “I’m gonna cut the ropes, but you have to hold your legs and wrists tight so he doesn’t notice.” He hurriedly whispered.

As he watched the soldier from the corner of his eye, he thought it pointless to check her bindings with so many people nearby rallying in his favor but couldn’t begrudge the soldier for wanting to be thorough. Maybe the poor clod deserved a promotion?

Looking out toward the crowd, he spread his arms. “So what say you!? Will we step aside and be the fools that this woman believes us to be by granting her freedom?.. or will we see justice this day and have her hanged as the traitor she is?!” He finished with a yell, almost breathless in his passion.

There was silence for a moment, then slowly but surely chants of “Hang her! Hang her!” began to fill the air slowly growing louder by the minute. ‘Damn it. I guess this is it.’ The cloaked man muttered at the rear of the crowd, nodding to his companion. “Wait for my signal... its gonna be close, but I know you can do this.” He reassured before slipping into the crowd toward Beatrix.

Braxton then turned back to Beatrix, who seemed to have a renewed interest in her surroundings. This puzzled him slightly, but it was far too late for a small bit of puzzlement to change anything. “You hear them, do you not? He asked, flashing a grin only she could see.” Do you have any last words for the good people of Alexandria? “He finished loudly. In a way, he hoped she would have the guile to finish her life with some sarcasm or other act of defiance. It would make for all the better of a show.

“I have nothing to say to you.” She replied coldly then looked out over the crowd. “It is true that I have made many mistakes of which I can never atone for but it is HE, the one that has stolen the throne, that is the traitor!”

Braxton smiled, it had been exactly as he had hoped. “See the anger in her eyes! The fury of one that is controlled by the darkness within her! Even with her last breath, she would waste it only to try to deceive you once more! Fortunately I, your king, will see to it that you are not led astray!” He finished, smiling over the crowd.

“You’re no more a king than the rats that dwell in the sewers!” A loud yell erupted from the rooftop of a nearby building. Braxton whipped around and

gaped; Standing atop the clay roof was none other than Steiner still dressed in his captain's armor. The cloaked man looked up in surprise, but grinned as he recognized who it was. Maybe things wouldn't be too hard after all. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, he slipped further through the crowd getting within reach of the gallows.

"You!" Braxton yelled but composed himself quickly. "Adelbert Steiner! I figured that you would show up if you had not already fled! Have you come to finish what your traitorous wife started!?"

"It is you that will be finished!" Steiner yelled, not disputing the accusation of being a traitor.

"Do you think you will stop our plans by executing one of us?! The throne will be ours!" He looked down towards Beatrix and saw her staring up at him but was too far away to make out her expression. He hoped she would be alright.

"There he admitted it!" Braxton yelled at the crowd then directed his attention back to Steiner. "But do not take me for a fool, do you expect me to believe that you came here alone?"

"What do you mean?" Steiner asked anxiously.

Braxton smiled evilly. "Guards! Bring them!"

Steiner felt his heart sink as half a dozen guards wearing Treno armor marched forward pulling along a struggling Cinna and Marcus.

“Damn it.” He breathed, feeling the confidence he had had slipping away. Beside Beatrix, Blank also cursed. How had he known?

“Criminals will conspire with criminals!” Braxton yelled up at him. “No longer are we the weak nation we once were! Only a fool would think that you would not try to stop the execution of you precious partner in crime! Guards, arrest him! Two traitors shall hang this day!”

From somewhere in the crowd, a short but shrill whistle pierced the air. Braxton Quickly tried to see where the whistle had come from, knowing that it had to have been a signal for something but before he had time to dwell on it, horrified screams erupted from the crowd as a few happened to look up, the rest soon joining as fear consumed them.

In the night sky, high above them a giant ball of smoke and fire exploded, washing the streets and townsmen in a fiery red glow. The fire and smoke spread into a wave of red and orange hues fanning out across the clouds until a figure appeared that

none of them had ever hoped to see again. Bahamut, in all of its fire and glory.

Screaming in fear, the townspeople tried to push and shove people out of the way desperate to at least get to the safety of their homes and families, but it was no use. The guards had sealed the gates to prevent an escape. Even Braxton stared up in awe at the great beast, momentarily forgetting about the execution.

Bahamut spiraled towards them, swooping back up and hanging over the town square as if calculating his prey. Time stood still as everyone was forced to watch as it opened its sharp toothed mouth revealing the flames behind its jaws. “Gods!” Braxton exclaimed, taking a step back. He hadn’t planned for this! The stories were true!

Just as he was sure that all of them were about to meet a fiery end, Bahamut closed his mouth and upon flapping his powerful wings, shot into the night sky until he disappeared behind the clouds. Braxton stood agape, hands shaking until he came to his senses. The prisoner! He quickly turned around but knew that she would be gone even before he saw the cut ropes laying on the trap door.

“Godsdammit all!” he screamed, his fear boiling into rage. With a grimace he turned toward the soldiers from Treno and saw that their prisoners had also escaped. Running a hand over his now sweaty hair, he tried to calm his breathing as he looked down the alley that moments before a cloaked man had carried his collapsed partner followed by an Alexandrian soldier and a disbelieving Beatrix.

“Well played, Garnet.” He breathed. “Well played. Unfortunately for you, I am not so easily beaten.”

16. Fireside Reconnection

“Your highness, are you truly well?” Beatrix asked incredulously as she squatted down beside Garnet and the small campfire. The raven-haired girl smiled up at her weakly “I’m just a little exhausted; I’m sorry if I worried you.”

Beatrix shook her head dismissively. “I am just grateful that you are alive and well... What happened at the castle? And Zidane, how did he—”

“He saved me... Again.” Garnet sighed but chuckled lightly to herself. “And then, well.. I saved him.” After seeing her friend’s confusion deepen, she took a breath and told her everything that had happened the last few days including the events Zidane had filled in for her.

“So, it was his blood that covered your chamber and balcony...” Beatrix mused grimly as she looked into the fire.

“I really thought he was going to die this time...” Garnet trailed, her brows knitted in worry. “By some miracle he was there again right when I needed him the most just like he always was. But just as quickly,

he was leaving again and this time I just knew that if I didn't do something he really would be gone forever and it would have been my fault..”

When Beatrix looked at her face again, she could see the tears streaming down her cheeks even in the pale firelight though she did her best to quickly wipe them away. “He really did come back just like he told you he would, I doubt one injury would have done him in. I am sure he would have returned in no time.” She reassured, though it didn't take a doctor to know that that much blood loss wasn't something you could just walk away from.

“No, not this time.” Garnet replied softly, glancing toward the direction Blank and Zidane had wandered off to go find wood for the fire. Beatrix could tell she was antsy and mostly focused on whether or not she should chase after them . “He's not...” She paused, searching for the right words. “If I'm being honest, for a long time I felt like he was invincible. That no matter what happened he would always be okay, but I was being foolish. Whatever he went through after he left us at the Lifa Tree must have really hurt him badly and even though he hasn't really talked about it, I don't think he's ever going to get better.”

Beatrix extended her hand and placed it on the younger woman's shoulder. "I have known you long enough to know how you think. It is not your fault; it was his decision to stay behind." Garnet closed her eyes and let out another stressed sigh. As much as she didn't want to admit it to the young queen, she was probably right about Zidane never getting better. She had seen it many times before in times of war, if a person was grievously injured enough on the battlefield and somehow managed to live, they were never the same again. Sometimes it was physical injury that left them helpless to do much of anything, other times it was mental and honestly those were often much worse.

As if reading her mind, Garnet spoke again softly. "It doesn't matter to me if he isn't as strong as he used to be." She nodded gently to herself. "I'll do my best to be strong enough for both of us and from now on, I'll be the one that's there when he needs me."

Beatrix grinned at her knowingly. "You must really love him."

Garnet blushed, but didn't hesitate. "I have for a lot longer than I wanted to admit at first."

“From what I have seen, despite his upbringing you’ve chosen your man wisely.” Beatrix chuckled.

“What about Steiner? I know you’re worried sick about him.” Garnet countered.

Beatrix turned back toward the fire and busied herself by tossing in a few of the remaining sticks trying to ignore the question. After a few moments, she let out an exhausted breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding. “Everything has happened so fast that I guess I am still reeling. As a General I am not supposed to let things get to me, but I have not seen him in what feels like forever now and I do worry that he might not have made it out of the castle safely.”

“Beatrix, you know I’ve always thought of you like an older sister, not as my general. Even if we can’t fix this, you’ll always be my dearest friend so I don’t ever want you to feel like you can’t talk to me.”

“Did we miss something?” Blank asked, walking toward with an armload of firewood, Zidane trailing close behind grudgingly carrying a smaller stack.

“I’m still not sure setting up camp here is a great is a great idea.” Blank commented, looking around

at the small clearing nestled in the forest after dropping the pile on the ground. “Won’t there be patrols coming after us?”

“I don’t think so.” Zidane replied tiredly, wiping the sweat from his forehead despite the freezing temperatures. Blank noticed this but chose not to comment as he watched his friend sit down. “Thanks to Dagger’s idea of leaving behind a few things from Dali, they shouldn’t pick up on our trail and figure out we’re headed to Treno for at least a day or two. It would be better if we kept moving, but I gotta rest for a little while.”

“You’re not doin too good, are you?” Blank asked seriously as Garnet moved toward him and placed a hand on Zidane’s forehead and frowned.

“Mikoto says I’ll be fine as long as I don’t overdo it.” Zidane replied, though it did little to ease Garnet’s worry. “She thinks I’ll live as long as a normal person, which is apparently a good bit less than I would have lived originally which I’m more than fine with, but no matter how hard I try I’ll never be strong enough to protect the people I care about liked I used to. I guess for me the hardest part is trying to get over feeling useless.”

“You protected me and was there when I needed you the most. Of course, I wish you had came back a lot sooner, but I’m really glad you kept your promise and I don’t think you’re anything close to useless.” Garnet comforted, taking his hand.

“What do you say we go gather some snow to boil for water?” Beatrix asked Blank standing up and hoping he would take the hint after feeling the tension in the air.

“Yea, sure. Why not?” He shrugged nonchalantly, and the two walked off, giving the pair what Beatrix felt was much needed privacy.

After wrapping a traveling blanket around them both to stave off the wind that whipped with frigid cold and was beginning to chill them to the bone, Garnet was the first to speak. “You’re not just saying that you’re okay because you think it’s what I want to hear, are you?”

“I’m Fine.” He replied, more irritably than he intended, tail thumping against the ground. Garnet hesitated for a moment and decided to try to change tactics. “Just know if u want to talk about it, I’ll be here for you.”

“That’s the problem!” He exclaimed, letting out his frustration and spreading his arms as if to show her something only he could see and not meeting her gaze. “I’m supposed to be the one that protects you! What could I do if something charged out of the woods and attacked you? What will I do if the army does find us? I’m supposed to be here for you not just be a burden.”

“Zidane...” Garnet said with a softness in her voice he hadn’t heard very often. Letting his guard down he turned toward her. Before he could process what was happening, she kissed his lips. Just like the first time, it sent his world spinning, and when it settled, he found himself looking into her eyes. “What did I do to deserve an amazing kiss like that?” He asked dazedly.

Garnet smiled warmly. “You may not be as strong as you used to be, but you were still there for me like you always have been... maybe not every time I wished you were there, but when I needed you, really needed you, you were better than any knight in shining armor.”

Zidane scratched his head sheepishly. “I just couldn’t let anything happen to you. I knew I didn’t have a chance with anyone like you, but that didn’t

stop me from falling head over heels for you anyway. It doesn't help that you're breathtakingly beautiful."

Despite her efforts, she couldn't hide the blush on her cheeks. "Can I ask you something?"

He looked at her curiously for a moment. "You can always ask me anything."

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like if we just... left it all behind?" Garnet asked.

Zidane tilted his head back and stared up at the stars. "Probably a lot more than I should have."

"Maybe have a little house somewhere near a stream... We could go traveling and looking for treasure like we used to... I think... I think that would be nice." She finished, glancing at him to see what his reaction would be.

For what seemed like forever to her, he said nothing and continued to look up into the night sky as if searching for an answer that might be found there. Just as she thought he wouldn't reply he finally lowered his gaze to hers. "There was a time, a very long time, that I would have given anything even my last breath for that to be true. A simple life with you would be more than I could have ever

dreamed of. But recently I realized that I was being selfish. Even though nothing would make me more happy, you wouldn't be."

"But i—" Garnet began to defend, but Zidane cut her off. "As much as I was it would be true, I know you wouldn't be happy. You deserve better than me, but more than that you need a purpose and to be able to make a difference in this world. Hell, you might be happy and glad you mad the decision to leave with me for a little while, but after a while it would start to eat at you and eventually it would tear you apart Dagger."

Again, she wanted to deny his words, but deep down she knew he was right. Despite all the stresses that had come with it, she had loved knowing that to even a fe of the townspeople, she had made a true difference as their queen. But now, unless they could win against Braxton and the corrupt council, she wouldn't be much more than a fugitive, not even able to walk the streets of the city. She shook the thoughts from her head, refusing to ruin their moment alone together with self-pity.

"Despite how you feel about yourself, you're a good man." She replied with a shiver in her voice, scooting closer to Zidane and the fire as the wind

found its way into the fleeting warmth of the blanket. Trying not to think about the frigid cold that had her firmly in its grip, she shot him a sly look. “Besides, since you’re a handsome king now and I’m basically a fugitive at the moment, shouldn’t I be trying to woo you?”

“Careful, you wouldn’t want to get a man aroused now, would you?” Zidane commented suggestively as Garnet finally gave up on the blanket when it began to flap in the wind and got up to walk toward the safety of the tent. Pausing at the opening to the tent as Beatrix and Blank’s crunching footsteps drew near, she turned her head back towards him with a mischievous grin. “Maybe I wouldn’t mind?”

“Wait.. What?” Zidane stammered, mouth agape as she closed the tent behind her. Maybe she had changed since he last saw her after all? Damn, he could definitely get used to it. He thought as he shifted uncomfortably.

“Even though tonight is gonna suck,” Blank started, ignoring Zidane’s expression. “We all need to try to get as much rest as we can cause we need to try to cover a lot of ground at daybreak. I ain’t tired yet, so I’ll keep the first watch.”

Zidane nodded in agreement and mentally cursed as Beatrix climbed into the tent. Why couldn't he have packed an extra tent?

17. Mel

A/n: I apologize for the short chapters, but I plan on the next one being longer, and its been far too long since ive updated this story as often as I should have. I understand completely if a lot of the amazing readers that stuck with me through most of this story have given up on me finishing it. No matter my intentions, I often find my ability to hurry and finish the next chapter almost non-existent and can only keep striving to do better, because I truly enjoy writing these stories hopefully as much as you enjoy reading them. As always, if you enjoy this chapter or have any thought on the story or my writing in general, please comment and let me know!

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“It feels like forever since we’ve been here!” Garnet exclaimed as she looked over the iron railing and down to the icy water that flowed beneath Treno, her warm breath visible in the cool night air. “I almost forgot how beautiful this place is.”

“I’m not sure beautiful is the word I’d use.” Blank commented drably while eyeing a elderly man passed out against the stone wall to their right with

the rest of his whiskey bottle dripping into a small puddle beside him. A nearby rat made its way hesitantly toward him, sniffing for leftover crumbs it could pilfer. “Though I guess I can say it hasn’t changed a bit, still the city of hard luck. They say if you’re lucky you win big, but most end up like this guy.”

“While some of the occupants may be less than tasteful, the architecture is indeed quite beautiful.” Beatrix added, trying to ignore the passed out man and coming to a stop near Garnet. “That being said, we should try our best to go unnoticed Gar— Miss Dagger.” She finished, barely stopping herself from calling her by her actual name.

“I know.” Garnet replied, trying not to let her mood dampen. She was glad that Beatrix wasn’t as persistent at sticking to formalities as Steiner had been and had used her nickname as they had discussed on the way here. “We have to be careful not to be noticed, but I don’t see any guards or people paying attention to us yet and I doubt we will find any here in the poor district.”

Beatrix shook her head but joined her in looking out over the railing instead of persisting.

“Is something bothering you?” Garnet asked, knowing that she would have normally been unrelenting in what she believed should be done.

“Despite our circumstances, I am gladdened to see you far more carefree than you have been since returning to the castle. If you don’t mind me asking, is it simply because Zidane has returned or is it because you are free from the duties of the castle again as well?”

Turning her gaze away from Beatrix and back towards the city, she let out a relenting sigh. “I know it’s wrong of me to say after everything that’s happened, but it is nice having a break from the stress of trying to run a kingdom and I do miss being able to travel to different places that I can’t see from the castle window...” Her expression turned more somber. “I just hope Steiner and the people of the kingdom will be okay.”

“Relax, I’m sure Steiner is alright, he’s actually come a long way.” Blank interjected, nodding to himself. “Right now, we need to worry about what the hell is taking Zidane so long.”

They knew coming to Treno was risky, but for now their only real option was to return to Mélamar and try to regroup then hopefully come up with a

plan to deal with Braxton and the corrupt council. Garnet had originally thought that returning to Lindblum would be best, but even Beatrix had agreed that the chance of them making it there without being captured would be slim at best. Fortunately, Zidane had remembered that Burtrard had been planning on heading to Treno after leaving Alexandria to tend to some unfinished errands and would hopefully still be there to fly them back.

“Let us just hope this Burtrard can be trusted.” Beatrix commented dryly. “From what I have heard, the man is a snake.”

“Zidane wanted us to wait here, but I say we go see whats goin on.” Blank added, rolling his shoulder and starting in the direction his friend had taken.

“Wait.” Garnet stated firmly, grabbing his arm. “We need to stay here.”

“Since when do you do everything Zidane asks you to? You don’t listen to him either.” Blank countered, pulling his arm free. “If we keep standing around here, we might as well turn ourselves in.”

Garnet faltered for a moment, then moved in front of him blocking his path. “You’re right, I don’t.

But sometimes I wish I had. We don't know who Burtrard is, and Beatrix may be right in that we can't trust him, but I DO trust Zidane." Her stance softened a bit as she continued. "Let's just give him a few more minutes?"

"Ugh." Blank groaned, making no effort to hide his frustration. "Fine, but if he doesn't come back soon I'm gonna go look for him and you won't stop me, but I guess for now I'll see if theres anything we need in this item shop." He relented, heading instead to the nearby shop.

"Um... Excuse me?" a little girl asked, tugging Garnet's sleeve and almost making her jump. "Did you say Zidane?"

"Huh?" Garnet fumbled, surprised by the girl's question and not sure how to respond. "Yes, He's... a very dear friend of mine."

"I see." The little girl beamed up at her. "You must be his Girlfriend!"

Garnet's face quickly reddened. "No!— I mean yes!.. well, we haven't really... How do you know him?" She finally managed to get out, trying to avoid the question.

“Well, I don’t really.” She shifted uncomfortably. “My name is Melamie. I never met him myself, but he helped my little brother Ralph feel a lot better when he was sad, and I wanted to thank him for it.”

Garnet knelt down to her; embarrassment forgotten as her curiosity peaked. “What do you mean, what happened?”

Mel sobered slightly and stared at a dirty spot on the concrete as she concentrated on remembering. “It was all because some bad men were talking about the Queen of Alexandria.”

“What were they saying?” Garnet asked uncomfortably.

“It was mostly the one big guy talking loudly... he was saying that the queen sent an assa..in?” She shook her head in frustration at not being able to pronounce it. “She sent a bad person to kill a guard, his name was Arnas I think; I used to play with his daughter Molly, but I haven’t seen her since he it happened... anyway, they also said the queen was a tyrant that wanted to take our food and stuff away and a bunch of other bad things that were really mean.”

Garnet forced herself to swallow as she processed this. She wasn't naïve enough to think people spoke nicely of her everywhere, but that didn't make it any easier to hear. "Where does your brother come in?"

"Well, first I noticed the cloaked man in the crowd as he tried to push past me toward the man that was saying the bad things. Even though I couldn't see his face I could tell how angry he was. If that makes sense? I don't know what he was gonna do if he made it through the crowd, there were a lot of people in his way, but I did see him reaching for a knife he was wearing so I think he was planning on hurting him... but that's when my brother, who was supposed to be picking up fruit from the market, started screaming at the bad man."

This time Garnet said nothing, lost in her own thoughts. "Me and my brother are from Alexandria, so it made him really angry when they started saying bad things about the queen because our daddy was a soldier that protected the castle. He tried to get them to stop saying bad things about her, but he's still really upset about what happened to our daddy and when they said he was being stupid and started talking about him too, he ran away crying." Mel continued, trying to hold back her own emotions at remembering her brother upset.

“My brother said that the cloaked man, I know it had to be the same one, followed him into the alley then sat and talked to him until he felt better. He told Ralph his name was Zidane and one of the things he told him that he remembered was that sometimes we have to do things to look after the people we love, even if it means you can’t be with them the way you want to. Since then, my brother has been working really hard to help Momma so she isn’t always so tired and they both seem a lot happier... so I wanted to thank him if I saw him again... If you’re his girlfriend, will you tell him for me?” Mel finished, giving Garnet a slightly confused look as she wondered why she was wiping her tears away with her sleeve despite smiling warmly at her.

“I promise, I’ll tell him. And even though I may not can speak for the queen of Alexandria, I promise I’ll do everything I can to make sure no one take your food or stuff away and one day if I can, I’ll make sure your mother doesn’t have to work so hard and you and your brother can play more.” Garnet finished as Mel beamed up at her.

“Really!? Do you mean it?” Mel asked excitedly. Garnet nodded assuredly and the young girl thanked her again before running off to continue her errands.

“It took me a long time to learn that sometimes a simple act of kindness can leave a deeper impact than most great deeds accomplished on the battlefield.” Beatrix commented a Mel disappeared down the alley. “Are you alright?” She asked.

“I feel... better. As much as a part of me wishes I could just live a simple life, she reminded me that we still have so much left to fight for.” Garnet answered, standing up confidently as Blank rejoined them.

“Did I miss something?” He asked, noticing their change in mood.

Beatrix shook her head dismissively. “Nothing important.”

He was going to ask her to elaborate, if only to pass some time, but before he could Zidane finally rounded the corner looking for more tired than when they had arrived but also relieved.

“Hey, I’m sorry it took so long, is everyone ready to go?” Zidane asked.

“Yea, let’s get the hell out of here.” Blank answered. The others nodded in agreement.

18. Return to Mélamar

A/n: I hope this chapter doesn't feel too much like a filler chapter, I had planned on skipping this part of the story, but I felt like it was needed. Anyway, I appreciate all of you for continuing to read my story! If you enjoy this chapter please take a few minutes to leave a review and let me know what u think!

...

“So, this is Mélamar...” Beatrix marveled, looking at the steadily growing kingdom as the airship slowed toward the landing dock. “You did all of this?” she asked, eyeing Zidane

Zidane shrugged awkwardly and looked away from her. “No, I just tried to help here and there where I could.

“Mm. I see.” Beatrix replied, giving him another look he couldn't quite decipher. “Either way, establishing a full-fledged kingdom in such a short time could not have been an easy endeavor.”

“It wasn't, but thanks to everyone working together, it's come a long way.” He replied, gazing

at it fondly.

“I’m sure you did a lot more than you would admit to.” Garnet added, joining the conversation and slyly slipping her hand into his hoping that Beatrix wouldn’t comment. “So, what is this surprise you wanted to show us?”

He grinned at her appreciatively. “Now that would be telling, wouldn’t it?” He teased as the airship clanked to a halt in the dock.

“Your Majesty! You’ve returned!” A small crowd exclaimed, excitedly greeting their arrival. Zidane let out a light groan as he walked toward them. “I’ve told all of you before, you can just call me Zidane. I’d really prefer that you don’t be so formal.”

“Well, this is a change.” Garnet grinned, fighting back a laugh. “Shall you lead the way your highness?”

“Don’t start that with me.” Zidane shot back at her with the most serious expression he could muster, though it was met only with a deceptively innocent smile.

“Pardon me, your Excellence. I meant no disrespect.” She teased, brushing past him and

heading to where she thought the center of the city would be.

Beatrix raised an eyebrow as Zidane gaped after her. “Something wrong?” she asked bemusedly.

“Uh.. No. Nope.” He answered, regaining his composure and hurrying after Garnet, leaving Beatrix to ponder how much he had really changed since his return. Perhaps he truly was as unique as Garnet often argued. As she began to follow after the pair, Blank turned to Burtrard who had been standing silently nearby. “What about u?”

“Oh dont let me intrude.” Burtrard waved dismissively. As the new treasurer, i believe it would be wise that I get acquainted with the markets. So, it will be a while before I head to the castle.”

“Suit yourself.” Blank shrugged, walking off to join the others.

Walking through the city, with Zidane trailing close behind, Garnet couldn’t help marveling at how quickly the place had grown. It wasn’t nearly as large as Alexandria, but the houses and streets that were finished were incredibly well done, not even the walkways were haphazardly thrown together as one might expect from a city built so quickly. As

they walked through the market, past all of the various shops and stalls, she realized the city did have one thing that Alexandria sorely lacked. The presence of fresh fruit and vegetables during the winter was very surprising, but the main difference was simply the harmony. Despite being filled with people of almost every race and culture, most seemed to be treated equally.

She was slightly taken aback as even one of the most elegantly dressed merchants greeted the poor citizens just as enthusiastically as they did the wealthy ones. “How did you accomplish that?” She found herself asking incredulously. “I’ve been trying to get rid of the oppression of the poor since I ascended the throne, but no matter what I did, the wealthy still shunned the poor. What did I do wrong?”

Zidane placed his hand on her shoulder and shook his head dismissively. “I think getting people to change is probably one of the hardest things to do. We just got lucky here because everyone knew we were starting things differently and weren’t set on what to expect.”

“But look at them!” Garnet exclaimed, gesturing to a poor girl dressed in a homemade burlap jacket

buying a small roll of leftover fabric from the silk dealer. The amount the little girl paid looked to be a single coin and was obviously less than what the fabric was worth, but the merchant wordlessly accepted it and after jotting down a note, moved on to the next customer. “It can’t just be because this is a new kingdom! There’s no way our merchants would take less than what their merchandise is worth, no matter how bad the customer needed it! Your merchants can’t just be that much nicer, I think I’ve even seen a few of them in Alexandria.”

“A lot of the merchants here do travel.” Zidane acknowledged. “Some of them are only seasonal.”

“Then what are you doing differently?” She implored, her frustration at herself more than evident.

Zidane walked toward the merchant in question, stopping a few feet from his stall. The man looked at him, gave him a nod of respect, then carried on helping his customers. “I think some of them do it because they genuinely know what it is to not have anything. When most of the people first came here, even a lot of the ones that are wealthy now came with only the clothes on their back.” He paused for a moment collecting his thoughts, but Garnet didn’t

interrupt him. “I can’t pretend everyone has that sentiment though, a lot of them just do it for the tax break.”

“A tax break?” Beatrix asked as Garnet pondered his words.

Zidane nodded again. “For the regular taxes we took a page out of Alexandria’s book and basically copied it only adjusting where we had to since people here had even less money. Once we saw a gap growing between merchants importing their goods versus stuff made or sold here, we came up with our own merchant tax laws to try to make it more fair but also not drive away the merchants we desperately needed.”

“Can you explain it?” Garnet asked, her gaze still fixed on the spot she had been staring lost in thought.

“It’s more complicated than something I could have come up with on my own, that’s for sure. I owe a lot to Reginald, but basically when a traveling merchant enters the country or an established one orders his goods from somewhere else, they’re charged an importation tax based on the value of their goods and a separate income tax based on how much profit they make. If they sell at a price that’s a

lot higher than what it should be, the tax is heftier than if they sell it for a price that falls in line with what our trade council determines is fair market price.” Zidane finished, hoping he explained it correctly.

“That makes sense.” Garnet commented. “But where does the tax break come in?”

Zidane moved away from the stall and resumed walking toward the direction of the castle that was still under construction, with Garnet and Beatrix close behind waiting for him to continue his explanation. Blank kept up with the trio, but showed no interest in the conversation.

“Even with the taxes like that, the poorer people were still struggling to get the things they needed just to survive. So, we negotiated and came to an agreement that if a merchant would sell their lesser valued products at the price of just one Gil to those obviously in need, it would be considered charity and as long as everything is documented likes it’s supposed to be, our treasury would either pay them for the total cost that the merchant paid for the item or reduce the merchant taxes they owe by that amount.”

Zidane glanced at Garnet, and he could still see the wheels turning in her mind. “But wouldn’t that eventually cause the treasury to go broke?”

As they continued forward, the castle doors steadily came into closer view. “We were worried about that at first, and I guess it could go bad if someone tried to take advantage of it, but so far there’s only been one merchant that we’ve actually had to give money to, and that’s the baker. He gives away all of the leftover bread at the end of the day to anyone that’s hungry. Thankfully, mostly because of Mikoto, grain is cheap and hasn’t been too hard to come by.”

“Do you believe that things will stay this tranquil here?” Beatrix asked suddenly, causing Zidane to slow down. “If left alone, maybe. But my general and advisor are pretty sure that we’ll be attacked soon.”

“By Alexandria or Treno...” Garnet added softly.

Zidane nodded solemnly. “If Braxton is willing to try to kill you to get the throne, then it’s only a matter of time.”

“What will the kingdom if it is attacked?” Blank asked the question that was on all of their minds.

“How bout we discuss that later?” Zidane smiled, pushing the castle doors open. “Theres someone I think u might want to meet.”

“Who?” Garnet began to ask as they entered the castle foyer but was met by a familiar voice. ‘Garnet?’ She turned sharply toward it and standing on the left hand stairs was Freya smiling broadly at her. “Freya! It is you!”

“That it is.” Freya chuckled, walking toward her and embracing the younger woman in a hug. “It’s been quite a long time. Too long.”

“What happened to you? You were coming to visit every few weeks and then you just stopped. I was really worried about you!” Garnet exclaimed, unable to hold back her own smile at finally being reunited with her old friend

Freya smiled at her apologetically. “I’m sorry I stopped coming, my hands were bit tied for a lot longer than I would have liked... Thanks to Zidane though, I’m back on my feet and doing well.”

“I’m just glad your okay.” Garnet replied, shaking her head dismissively. “Are you visiting here or—”

“No, this is my home now. I loved Burmecia, but.. i can’t go back there at least not for a long while.” Freya interrupted grimly but softened when her words were met with a look of deep concern. “Don’t be sad for me, I’m happy here. I’ve little hope that Fratley will ever visit me here but it comforts me knowing he left Burmecia in good health to continue his adventures.”

“Then that’s good at least.” Garnet smiled apologetically, remembering how hard it had been on Freya that he hadn’t remembered who she was.

“On a brighter note, I’m sure Vivi will be excited to see you too.” Freya grinned.

“Oh, Vivi is here too?” She returned, unable to hide her surprise.

“Indeed, He’s quite something these days. He’s become something of a magical scholar, always looking for new spells that can help out the city.” Freya answered, finally turning her attention towards Zidane. “I’m glad you returned safely as well, your Highness.”

“Oh come on!” Zidane complained, earning a snort from Blank. “We’ve been over this!”

Fighting a chuckle along with Garnet, Freya retorted bemusedly. “Like it or not, that is your title title, so you might as well get used to it.”

Zidane sighed theatrically, but chose to change the subject. “Is there any food? I’m pretty sure we’re all starving.”

“You can say that again...” Blank added.

“Yes, your highness. As soon as we received word of your arrival we started preparing a feast for your return.” A blond-haired teenage girl with green eyes that worked as one of the castle staff chimed in. “As per your requests, we kept the luxurious items to a minimum. Also, um your highness, there are quite a few of the merchants and business merchants that will be attending, and I think some of them hoped to have an audience with you.”

“Thank you. I wish it could have been more private, but I have been gone a while so I guess it’s to be expected. Is there anything else?” The girl’s face reddened considerably and she stuttered for a moment before Freya jumped in. “I think you’re flustering the poor girl. There are other matters that needed tending to, but i think they can wait til tomorrow. For now, I don’t think a celebration is uncalled for. Do you?”

Zidane eyed Garnet for a second before responding. “Sure, this time I think that’d be a good idea.”

“We all heard about what happened in Alexandria so what do you say we try to make it be how that celebration should have went?” Freya smiled.

“That sounds like a plan.” Zidane agreed.

“I— I think everything should be ready to start in just a couple hours sir— your highness.” She quickly bowed nervously. Garnet felt bad for the girl, it wasn’t easy adjusting to life in a castle.

“What’s your name?” Zidane asked gently.

“Um... Claire sir.” She offered, looking to be on the verge of panic.

“You’re new here aren’t you?” He asked, though the answer was obvious.

“Yes. I mean I am sir! I’m so sorry if im not doing a good job! I— my family was living on the streets of Treno and we didnt have anywhere else to go when we moved here. My— My parents tried to get a job, but they’re not in good health right now and can’t work so we didn’t know what to do till Lady Freya was nice enough to give me this job.

Please, don't fire me. I don't know what else I can —" Clair rambled breaking into tears before Zidane finally cut her off.

"Hey, Hey. Calm down, you haven't done anything wrong." He offered, getting a look of relief in return. "Try to relax. In truth, we're really no more special than you. I may be your king, but that's just a job with a fancy title. So, just keep working hard and I'm sure you'll accomplish all the things you're wanting to."

Her redness didn't fade away, but she finally seemed to relax a little. "Thank you sir. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Hmm." Zidane pondered for a second. "If the food isn't gonna be ready for a while, I'm sure Dagger would love a hot bath before party. Would you care to help her with that?"

Garnet looked down at the clothes she had purchased from Dali and grimaced at their filthy state, having trekking for days on foot and encountering various monsters along the way. They hadn't had time to relax in town, so she wondered how many days it had actually been since she'd had a proper bath, not counting a failed attempt at bathing in the frigid creek near one of the places

they had camped. The icy water had sent her scurrying back to the warmth of the campfire.

As if reading her thoughts, Claire exclaimed enthusiastically. “Of course! I’ll be happy to help you! I’ll make sure to find you something clean and nice for you to wear tonight! Come with me!” She finished, taking Garnet by the hand and leading her forward. As they started to round the corner, Garnet turned her head and mouthed “Thank you.” to Zidane before disappearing down the hallway.

“I dont think I’ll ever get used to this.” Blank commented, looking around.

“Huh, what do u mean?” Zidane asked, heading up the stairs and toward his chamber.

“This. We used to just be thieves, now look at us!” Blank answered sounding equally astounded and frustrated.

Zidane shook his head. “You’re telling me. Sometimes I really can’t help but wonder if I really did die back there in the Lifa Tree and maybe all of this is just some messed up afterlife.”

“...” Neither Blank nor Beatrix made any reply, the mood immediately sobering.

“C’mon, y’all are both special guests here. I’ll show you where your rooms are so you can wash up and relax too.” He offered, looking weary.

“Yea, that sounds great.” Blank nodded. “looks like you need to rest too.”

“I’ll be fine by the time the party starts.” He reassured before showing them to their rooms and closing the door to his chambers behind him. Walking into his private bathroom, he propped himself up with both arms beside the hand washing basin and gazed into the mirror at the dirty blond-haired man looking back at him. “It wasn’t easy and it sure as hell didnt go according to plan, but we did it. I still haven’t told her exactly how I feel like I promised I would, but shes here now and I dont plan on screwing this up. So, it’s time to get clean and dress up in something nice for her; she deserves an unforgettable night.”

19. Ghosts of the Past

A/n: Thanks everyone that keeps reading my story and those of u that take the time to review! I didn't originally intend this to be the next chapter, but here we are and hopefully you will enjoy it. As a warning I will say this is probably the darkest chapter in the story, and may upset you as it does deal with abuse of children. I personally feel that abuse of any kind is never ok for any reason and if you or someone you know is in that kind of situation then they need to know that there's people out there that do care and will help any way that hey can. As for this chapter, I feel it's necessary to explain the character's motives and to give a little in site into his backstory. If you have any thoughts, or even just need someone to talk to, feel free to let me know! Hope everyone is having a great start to 2023!

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He dipped the tip of his quill into the blackness of the ink reservoir while absentmindedly staring at the parchment resting on the desk in front of him. Normally the lights in the royal chamber could be seen blazing brightly from his window high atop the

castle. Many often thought it strange, but the fact was that he rarely slept. When he did, it was never for very long as there was far too much to do, and time shouldn't be wasted lying uselessly in bed. Even as a child, the man he had called his father had made sure that he knew not to ever waste valuable time. That lesson had been beaten into him thoroughly. So, sleeping late, relaxing, or sitting around gossiping like many nobles did was simply out of the question.

He looked up at the ceiling while tapping his fingers on the polished desk and couldn't help but to reminisce about his childhood. He remembered most of it, all the way back till around when he was eight years old. Most of the kids his age probably spent their days playing outside in the streets or following their parents around as they did their trades. If they were lucky, some spent their time indoors being tutored in mathematics and other courses fitting the nobles they would become. For the most part, their only worries were trying to find new and inventive ways to cure the boredom that comes with youth. He, however, had not been so lucky. Every time he thought about his own childhood, his mood grew sour, but the thoughts were never that easy to get rid

of and more often than not he couldn't stop dwelling on them.

Trying to distract himself from his current train of thought because he knew exactly where it would lead, as it always did, he shuffled the stack of parchment around almost violently before lining it up back up neatly in line with the edge of the desk. For a moment, he decided to focus on more recent events and found himself focusing on Garnet again. She was beautiful, no one could deny that. Her beauty was something fitting of a goddess never meant to be soiled by mere mortals. Skin of delicate porcelain and hair like fine velvet. Any one thing by itself would have made her beautiful, but what made her even more alluring was her innocence; it was almost inconceivable that she stayed blissfully ignorant of the way most men stared at her appreciatively. He wagered that there were many rich men that would part with most of their fortune to spend just a solitary night with her. He couldn't blame them, but they were all fools. Her true beauty lay in her mind and her abilities. She was brilliant; arguably his equal in every way. So, wasn't it logical for him to adore her?

“Hmm...” He pondered, picking up the parchment and holding it far too tight tightly. “Then

why is it that I want more than anything to see her burned alive like the wench she is?!” He yelled suddenly, ripping the parchment in half and wadding the pieces up tightly.

“Damn you Garnet!” He fumed. ‘It was all going exactly as intended until you just had to muck it all up with your common blood filth! You could have been a flower salesman somewhere, or maybe even been bright enough to own your own brothel! But no! You thought you could play at being queen and rob me of what was rightfully mine!’ He paced back and forth across the spacious room in the light of the single meagre lantern trying to calm himself but found that his rage couldn’t be so easily contained. “Even when I finally should have been rid of you, you had to show up again with a Godsdamn Eidolon!” He roared, slinging the contents of the desk across the room. “Now thanks to you, people have begun to question my rule! You think I don’t hear the whispers that you’re still alive and that I have stolen YOUR castle?! I hope you can hear me, Garnet! There will be retribution for this, and their death will be on your hands!” Braxton began to laugh. It was a small chuckle at first, almost just a sneer but slowly it grew into a frenzy-like fit of laughter that continued for quite a while.

“What if the people find out your secret as well?” A small pale black-haired boy dressed in a blue suit asked from the corner of the room.

“What?” Braxton asked suddenly, his laughter immediately coming to an end. He turned around sharply and stared at the boy, who showed no fear or any other discernable emotions. “What did you just say to me?”

The boy said nothing, only stood gazing at him silently without moving.

“They will never find out!” He hissed quietly. “If you so much as even try to utter one syllable of it then I’ll...”

“Kill me?” The boy offered in the same emotionless voice.

“Yes..” Braxton confirmed softly, becoming lost in the memories that washed over him. “Just like back then... I still remember that day.”

“Benjamin! Get your sorry backside out of bed!” The man yelled, kicking him in the side.

“Oww!” Benjamin cried, struggling to sit up while clutching the spot that would surely be bruised and even sorer in a couple of hours.

“What was that for, father?” He asked hurtfully, trying his best to hold back the tears in his eyes. When his Father, or at least the man he considered one, drew his hand back, he feared that he would hit him again for asking and quickly covered his head with his arms. Quickly, he stole a glance at the other three children cowering in the far corner hoping one of them would help him, but they were just as scared as he was.

Milda was the youngest at only six, but he, Gilroy and Renley were all eight years old. As similar as they all looked with their unwashed faces covered in dirt, none of them of them were related, though they guessed it could have been possible since they also shared not knowing who their real parents were. Before coming here, all they remembered was running the streets at night terrified that the wolves and other creatures that howled in the distance would catch them and devour them. After a few moments passed, and no further hit came, Benjamin nervously returned his gaze upward. The man was looking at him in disgust and was pointing out of the door.

“Took you long enough.” The man started. “It’s morning and I didn’t start this orphanage so that you could sit on you ass and suckle away all of my

grain and milk! It's time to earn your keep boys and girls. I don't care how you do it, but unless you want to go back out on the streets for good, then each of you better bring me ten gil before nightfall."

"But..We still don't know how to make gil..." Gilroy whined.

"We— We can't stay out there all night again! You said the monsters will get us and we almost died last time!" Milda exclaimed in fear.

The man squatted down to their level with a dark grin. "Well I guess that's your problem to deal with isn't it?" He then grabbed Gilroy by the collar and shoved him toward the door. "Now get goin! I ain't gonna tell you again!"

"Y— yes sir!" Gilroy answered timidly, not wanting to get hurt. As Benjamin watched, his anger swelled, and he tightly held onto the knife concealed in his pocket that he had stolen the last time they had been forced out to try to earn their father money.

The man turned to Renley who was still cowering in the corner coughing weakly. "Are you gonna do what your told or do I need to beat some sense into you again?" He growled.

“Stay away from my big brother!” Milda yelled, jumping in front of him defiantly.

“Now you listen here you little wench...” The man started, balling his right fist in a rage and grabbing her by the shirt with his left. “You know you don’t tell me what to do. Now you gotta suffer the consequences.”

“No!” Benjamin screamed, jumping on him from behind and stabbing him in the neck with his small knife.

“Wha-?” The man gurgled incredulously, dropping Milda and clutching his throat desperately trying to stop the blood. “I won’t let you hurt her or anyone else!” Benjamin roared as the man fell to the ground dead.

“What did you do?..” Milda asked quietly, frozen in shock and terror. ‘I killed him!’ Benjamin yelled, then jumped on top of the dead man continuing to stab him repeatedly until he ran out of breath.. “I killed him.”

Braxton’s heart raced as he relived the memory as fresh and vivid as the day it happened. He no longer remembered why he killed the man, only that he had been his first and that it had felt glorious. All the

ones after that one had never felt so incredibly exhilarating.

“What happened after that?” The boy in the corner asked, just as before.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Braxton laughed, not wanting to look at him anymore. The boy did not respond, and the silence dragged on until Braxton couldn’t take any more. ‘I killed them! All of them! Are you happy?’ He spat in mock disgust. “Would you believe I did it to save them?” He laughed.

“Save them?”

“Yes.” Braxton replied with irritation, his anger building again upon hearing the boy’s condescending tone that only he could hear. “The streets were dangerous; Father knew that better than anyone. I couldn’t let the others suffer like that. The monsters would have torn them apart! Just because no one else could see them doesn’t mean they weren’t there! The others thought we were finally free of that wretched place and that the outside wasn’t as horrible as father had told us. All they saw were the people that were pretending to be nice to them by giving them their poisoned bread and foul water! They took it all thinking it was delicious, but I knew the truth I say the cage that was slowly

enveloping them again. The world may have looked bright and cheerful but in the shadows the monsters we're waiting in earnest! So, I had no choice! I had to save them from the world that was out to destroy them!"

"Like you saved me?" The boy asked, louder this time.

"Yes! Do you think I regret killing you? You're free now because of me! You should be thanking me!"

"You didn't kill me to save me, you killed me because of what I was and what I looked like." The boy countered showing a hint of anger for the first time.

"Is that what you think?" Braxton spat. "I killed you because I had to! If I had of let you live do you think I could have made It to where I am now? If they knew that I was.." Braxton trailed off, beathing heavily.

"Not only a commoner, but a murderer?" The boy finished for him.

"Shut your mouth!" Braxton bellowed. "I am not!"

The boy slowly began to move towards him. “You killed me because I was a noble and I looked just like you.”

Braxton took a step back as the boy drew near. “No, that isn’t true.”

“My name was Anton Braxton before you killed me.” The boy continued.

“No, that name is mine!”

“When you found out my father was in poor health and that he would never notice if you took my place, you decided that you deserved my life more than I did. Poor Benjamin, you couldn’t handle the life you were given.”

“I am not Benjamin! My name is Anton!” He defended, grabbing onto the iron fireplace spike from behind his back.

“Why did you kill me Benjamin, when all you wanted was to see you friends again? You could have been a hero Benjamin, so why did you steal my life? What did I do to deserve to die? And what do you deserve now?”

“Stay away from me!” Braxton yelled, swinging the iron bar at the boy’s head and watching in

amazement as it passed clean through as if only striking air. The boy smiled morosely. ‘You can’t get rid of me like that.’ He commented softly. “You are me now, so I’m with you always. We are one and the same. And not just me either, we’re all here.”

“All of you?” Braxton trembled breathlessly, turning around in fear. Standing near the door were faces he’d never forget.

Thank you for saving us. Thanks to you, we’ll always be here with you. “Milda, Renley, Gilroy and many others chimed in unison. You said Garnet would be joining us soon, so don’t you have work to do? Father will be returning soon, and he won’t be happy about what you did to him. He doesn’t want you to waste any more time...”

“No!” Braxton screamed as he jerked awake from his desk, knocking over the half empty ink bottle in the process and falling backward to the floor with a thud. He struggled to regain his feet and quickly looked around the room. After a few moments of forcing his heart rate to slow down, he ran his hand through his hair. “It was just a dream.. only a dream.

A knock on the door suddenly broke his thoughts and caused him to jump. “Is everything alright my

lord?” a maid asked softly from the other side of the heavy wood.

“Y-yes.” He affirmed, barely keeping his composure. “I just spilled my ink bottle, away with you.”

“Yes sir.” She responded and he could hear her light footsteps walking away. After another few moments of quiet listening, he sat back down at his desk and pulled another ink bottle from the drawer. “There’s work to be done.”

20. Alexandria's Treasure

A/n: I had planned on making this story a lot longer, but after careful consideration this is the final chapter of Alexandria's Treasure. I just want to take a second to thank all of my fellow writers, without them I probably would never made it this far with this story. I actually considered abandoning my writing multiple times, but thanks to them I've found the motivation to keep writing the stories I've grown to love.

..

Garnet sighed in delight as she sank beneath the lavender scented bubbles of the steamy bath that had been prepared for her at the Mélamar castle. It had been a few weeks now since she had been able to bathe as properly as she would have liked and while it did bring back some nostalgic memories of the journey they had all been a part of, gods it was nice to feel clean again. More than that, she needed a little while to get her thoughts back in order.

In some ways, the last few weeks had been even more chaotic than her first journey that she had been sure was her last. How quickly life can change

completely! What had started as another twisted nightmare, had quickly and literally plunged her into possibilities even her wildest dreams couldn't have competed with.

At first it had seemed that again she was doomed to lose everything, this time including her own life. She had known for months that there was growing unrest amongst the Alexandrian Royal Council. Part of it no doubt stemmed from the now public knowledge that she had been adopted by the late Queen Brahne instead of being born into the royal bloodline, but most of their resentment of her had been caused by her own refusal to increase the kingdom's taxes by all but the smallest margins. The result of her actions had meant that her people were surviving the winter, but also that the government was now all but broke and the castle was still in ill-repair. Should she have compromised by raising the taxes a little higher?

She let out a frustrated groan and tilted her neck back on the smooth metal edge of the bath. Her mother may have had a lot of faults, she could admit that now, but no matter what decisions her mother made, she never second guessed herself or questioned her own decisions. So, why was she forever doomed to constantly having to steady her

own resolve? If not her mother, why couldn't she just be calm and confident like Zidane always seemed to be?

Not even realizing that she had let out another groan, Beatrix commented suddenly from her own bath a few feet away, startling her from her thoughts. "That doesn't exactly sound like relaxing."

"Gods!" Garnet exclaimed, accidentally slipping beneath the bubbly surface and choking on a mouthful of soapy water.

"Are you alright?!" Beatrix asked with concern as Garnet coughed and spat to clear the water from her lungs.

"S-sorry!" Garnet exclaimed looking embarrassed. "I got so lost in my thoughts I almost completely forgot you were in here too!"

Beatrix let out a light chuckle. "You have been doing that a lot more recently."

"I have?" She asked on reflex, trying to study Beatrix's expression in the dimly lit room.

"I can't say I blame you.." Beatrix trailed off, breaking eye contact with her. "You've already been

through more than anyone should ever have to go through in their lifetime.”

Garnet let out a breath she didn’t realize she had been holding. “I should still be able to handle it better.”

The older woman shook her head in dismissal. “May I ask you something, your Majesty?”

“You should know by now that you can ask me anything.” She replied softly. Was there even a reason for Beatrix to address her formally anymore? What was a queen without a kingdom?

“Do you ever think about just letting it all go?” She asked, with a gentleness she wasn’t used to.

“What do you mean..?”

“For as long as I can remember...” Beatrix started, lost in her thoughts this time. ‘I have always followed my orders to the best of my ability.’ A short time passed before she continued, but Garnet remained silent. She had learned sometimes the best thing to say was nothing and to just listen. “Even when they were orders I should have ignored, I stuck to them because I thought that eventually I would feel happy for having served my kingdom like a proper General. But ever since Burmecia, it’s all

been weighing on me more and more every day. I wanted so badly to hate Braxton for locking me in that dungeon and for the things he did to me... but in the end all I felt was that I deserved it for all the crimes I've committed and the damage I have caused..."

"Beatrix, it wasn't your—" Garnet tried to reassure her, but was interrupted.

"Please, don't say it wasn't my fault." Beatrix implored.

"..." Garnet bit her bottom lip and forced herself not to say anything. Why couldn't she see that it had been her mother's orders?

"I may not ever be able to atone for the things I have done, let alone ever deserve to ask the ones lost for their forgiveness. But because of you Garnet, I have the strength to get up each day and endeavor to try."

"Because of me?" Garnet asked, dumbfounded. "What have I done?"

"No matter how bad things ever were, you never gave up. After Zidane left, I heard you most of the trip home crying your heart out in that airship cabin and banging on the walls in desperation. But, when

the time came to go back in the castle to fulfil your duties you held your head high and accomplished them with determination. Even when you were at your lowest, drinking yourself to sleep at your desk and had to be carried back to bed by the castle maids, the next day you still got to your feet and didn't give up."

"...The people needed me." Garnet defended, embarrassed by her friend's praise and cringing at remembering how bad she had gotten.

"I'm serious. Watching you, I couldn't help but feel that if you could handle everything on your shoulders and still continue to try to make a difference, then what kind of person would I be if I gave up just because of my own guilty conscious?"

"..." She didn't know how to respond.

Beatrix offered a reassuring smile. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that you need to stop blaming yourself. Neither of us can change a single thing that's happened, but we can make the best of the days we have left."

"I guess you're right." Garnet agreed, though she still the same conflixtions.

“For now you should be more worried about what’s going to be happening in about an hour.” Beatrix laughed, while stepping out and reaching for a towel.

“It won’t be much different than a regular banquet.” Garnet replied quickly, trying to hide a blush as she too hurried out of the bath and quickly dried off.

“Are you sure about that?” Beatrix smirked knowingly. “I saw how Zidane was looking at you earlier, and I haven’t seen you that carefree in quite sometime.”

Realizing it was pointless to hide her now bright red face, she instead tried to focus on the dress Claire had left her. Unlike the billowing and ornate dresses she had become used to back in Alexandria that were often heavy and uncomfortable, this one might as well have been the polar opposite. It certainly wasn’t what she had been expecting to wear, but figured it would be rude not to at least try it on. As she looked into the polished tin mirror, she couldn’t help but blush again at how she looked in the silky black dress. Unlike the others, this one hugged closely to her curves but not too tightly, only slightly flaring out when it reached her hips. The top

of the dress didn't make her feel self-conscious as it actually felt as comfortable as the orange suit she had come to love so much. The bottom however, was both elegantly beautiful and far more revealing than she had been used to. The slit in most of her dresses had been carefully disguised by multiple layers of fabric, so that no matter how she moved or even if she decided to wear her worn-out boots, no one was any the wiser. But in this one, the slit went down the side clearly showing most of her slender right leg and was adorned by a delicate pattern of blue flowers that slowly spread creating a blue fringe at the bottom.

“You look absolutely stunning.” Beatrix commented, walking toward her in a red dress slightly more muted than her own, with her faithful sword strapped to her side. “I don't think you'll have a problem keeping Zidane speechless.”

“Do you really think so?” She couldn't help but smile nervously. She didn't know why she felt so nervous, but somehow it wasn't a bad feeling. “I guess I'll find out.”

....

“Man, are you really that nervous?” Blank asked disinterestedly as he lay sprawled out on the leather

loveseat in the corner of the royal chamber.

“I’m not nervous, people are just gonna be expecting me to look nice.” Zidane reassured, straightening his light blue tie In front of the mirror.

“Suuurrrree.” Blank drawled, not bothering to look at him as he studied the pointless stone ceiling. “That’s what, the fourteenth time you’ve straightened your tie? I think your collar is a look crooked.”

“It is?” Zidane asked immediately, not picking up on his sarcasm and again checking the neck of his suit.

“Damn, what the hell happened to you?” Blank asked, sitting up and swinging his legs back to the floor, his own tuxedo pulled askew.

Zidane stopped what he was doing and looked at his friend skeptically. “What do you mean?”

“This isn’t like you!” Blank began in exasperation. “What happened to the guy that didn’t give a damn what people thought of him? When did you become scared that people might look down on you?”

“Hey!” He protested. “I still don’t care what any noble or some stranger in the castle might think of me! All that matters is that— nevermind.” He cut himself off, hoping his friend wouldn’t notice his near slip up, but unfortunately the gods didn’t seem to be feeling generous.

“There it is!” Blank laughed raucously, slapping his knee. “This is all just because you’re still hung up on Garnet!”

“Shuddup.” He defended lamely even though he knew it was pointless, he knew his friend was on a roll. After a moment or two of waiting for a sarcastic remark, however, nothing came. So, he looked back toward Blank out of curiosity. “No witty comment or the usual sarcasm?”

“No; Good for you bro.” Blank replied simply, no longer laughing.

“Huh?” He replied, caught completely off guard by his sudden change in demeanor.

“All joking aside, I think she’s perfect for you. Not only that, but I think she’s probably the only one willing to put up with your sorry ass.” He offered with a weak grin.

After deciphering Blank's words for a few seconds and coming to the conclusion that they couldn't have been anything but genuine, this time it was his turn to question. "Alright, now who's acting different? What's up with you?"

"Do you reckon Ruby is alright after everything that happened?" Blank asked suddenly.

"Why wouldn't she be? None of the city was destroyed or anything and from what our messengers have told us, everyone seems pretty content despite Braxton ascending the throne." He reassured.

"Well, they have to have realized by now that I was the guard that helped free Beatrix and if they know I was the guard then it's only a matter of time before they go after Ruby and—" Zidane interrupted as Blank began to pace the room anxiously. "Woah woah, Calm down! I'm sure they forgot all about you with Dagger summoning Bahamut! Why are you so worried?"

"We're having a kid!" Blank spat suddenly.

"Wait.. What!?" Zidane exclaimed. "Ruby's pregnant!? When I'm the hell did that happen!? The last time I saw you, you hadn't even told her how

you felt about her! Or did y'all just get drunk and have a one-night stand or something?"

Blank stopped pacing and shot him a disbelieving glare. "Just what kind of guy do you think I am?"

"Well... uh.." He scratched his head sheepishly.

Easing up on the glare, Blank began to explain. "What can I say? A lot of things changed after you left. Not long after we made it back, we decided to disband Tantalus. It just didn't seem right to keep on stealing like we used to after everything that happened.. instead, we started thinking more about the things that really mattered to each of us. Cinna decided to start helping Regent Cid on his airships and continuing to rebuild the city while me and Marcus headed to Alexandria to help the people in the poorer districts."

"I take it Ruby managed to get her theater running the way she wanted it to?" Zidane asked with a knowing grin.

"Yea, it took a lot of work and our part, but seeing her happy made it worth it. I honestly don't know how long it would have taken me to tell her how I felt about her if I hadn't visited the castle and

saw how bad of a shape Garnet was in with you being gone.”

“...How bad was it?” He asked guiltily.

“She hid it pretty well for the most part when she greeted us, but I know a hangover and swollen eyes from crying when I see them. There’s some things you just can’t hide well with makeup, especially from someone that’s dealt with makeup for years.”

“...”

“Anyway, I decided I didn’t want to leave Ruby with her not even knowing, so I told her everything... a few months later we ended tying the knot. I didn’t really plan on doing anything reckless after that, until Steiner showed up asking for help during one of the rare times Cinna came to visit and hell, I don’t know; it just felt like the gang was back together? That and we couldn’t have lived with ourselves if we just let Beatrix die cuz of some asshole.”

“I’m really sorry For what happened and that I didn’t make it to your wedding..” Zidane offered, placing his hand on Blank’s shoulder.

“It’s fine, nobody blames you; you had enough on your plate and we’re all just glad you’re still alive,

bro.”

“I can’t say I’m the same person I was, but I’m not gonna leave the people I care about behind again.”

Blank shook his head with a laugh and headed toward the door to the main hall. “You sure as hell better not and dammit I better be best man when you and Garnet get hitched.”

“What makes you so sure she would even say yes anyway?” He asked as he followed him out the door.

“Gods you’re oblivious.” Blank groaned. “I’m gonna go find a drink and enjoy myself.”

.....

The ballroom of Mélar castle, despite previously lacking fanciful decorations having only just recently finished construction, had quickly been transformed into a vibrant room teeming with life. In just the few short hours since the celebration had been announced, various merchants and cloth makers had put up bannisters and various other decorations in a way that really set the mood for how an elegant banquet and dance should be. Zidane had seen how much effort had been put into Alexandria’s celebration and he couldn’t help

feeling amazed at how much everyone had accomplished here in such a short time. The rustic style wooden tables that had been crafted by the dwarfs were filled with pretty much any kind of food or fruit you could possibly want, and the castle staff fluttered around filling anyone's drinks that looked like they might be thirsty. The busyness of a castle was no surprise, but with his insistence that all the staff receive proper wages, there was an air of contentment that he would argue couldn't be found anywhere else.

"It really is nice, isn't it?" Freya commented, walking up to him from behind.

"Yea... It's hard to believe they were able to do all of this in such a short time. Everyone has been working so hard to make this kingdom a nice home." Zidane nodded in agreement.

"Thanks in part to how dedicated their king is." She added, eyeing him thoughtfully.

He shrugged dismissively. "I'm nothing special. If anything, everyone should be thanking you instead of me. That's why, if you're okay with it, I'd love for you to be the one to give a speech tonight."

“Once an aspiring actor, and you don’t even like being in the spotlight.” She quipped, grabbing a glass of wine a passing server offered her. “I’d be honored to.”

“Thank you.” He replied simply. He had been scanning the crowd for the last few minutes but Freya was sure he still hadn’t found the person he was looking for.

“Relax, I’m sure Garnet and Beatrix will join us soon. Till then, try to enjoy yourself a little. Anxiousness doesn’t suit you.” He heard her comment as she mingled through the crowd toward another Burmecian that he didn’t think he had met before. No, that wasn’t right; neither of them were Burmecians anymore; they were simple people just like him.

“My lord?” A familiar and surprising voice called him from his left. Turning towards them, he honestly couldn’t believe who it was. “Reginald! You’re alive! What happened to you!?”

I’m afraid that’s a long story, Your Highness. “Reginald bowed apologetically. Despite having cleaned up and even donning a new clean suit, the older man hadn’t been able to hide all of the bruises that covered his face and neck.” I am so very sorry

that I failed you, your Highness. I set out to help her Majesty just as you requested, but as soon as I arrived it became more than apparent that my position on the council had changed quite dramatically. If it is quite alright with you, I would rather not go into the particulars but after all of the chaos that ensued, I managed to get free thanks to the help of Captain Adelbert Steiner.”

“Good ol’ Rusty; every I think he can’t surprise me he manages to do it. I know I used to give you a hard time Reginald, but I’m just glad you’re alright.” Zidane finished in relief.

“Thanks for your consideration my lord, It means a lot to me.” He smiled.

“You know you don’t have to be here, don’t you? Hell, you should probably be in bed resting. I can even have someone come and tend to you.”

“No.” Reginald shook his head vigorously in refusal. “I want to be here. I may be down, but that doesn’t mean I can’t take a little time to try to enjoy the festivities.”

“Alright.” Zidane chuckled; the man had always been incredibly stubborn. “You said Seiner helped you. Is he here?”

“Yes, I insisted that he come rest in the castle and join us here tonight. I believe he has retired to the washroom to freshen up.” Reginald confirmed as he took the seat that Zidane all but forced on him.

“That’s great!” He breathed. “I know there’s someone here that will be dying to see him!”

“I am glad that I could be of assistance, my lord. If you don’t mind I do believe I will take you up on your offer to rest here for a little while.” Reginald finished, looking exhausted.

“I thought you might.” Zidane smiled and moved towards the back of the room to see if he could see Steiner in the hallway, but so far there was no sign of the man. He debated on whether or not to go look for him but finally decided to give the man his space as a red dress caught the corner of his eye. Was that... Beatrix?”

He had to say that she looked beautiful out of her usual armored attire. Her long wavy brown hair swayed as she walked into the room, accenting her toned feminine features. If it had been a couple of years ago, he would have found himself drooling after her and hoping she wasn’t seeing anyone at the moment, but now he mainly just noticed that she looked exhausted. The last few weeks had taken

more than a toll on her. As if sensing his thoughts, she walked towards him.

'I have to say, I never thought I would see you dressed up outside of a play. "She chuckled.

'I could say the same to you. "He countered.

"Touché. The dancing is about to start, is his Majesty going to join in?" She teased, knowing he hated being addressed by his new title.

"Maybe later." he grinned and motioned with his eyes to behind her. "Though I think there is someone here that's dying to dance with you."

"what do you—" She began to ask while turning around.

"Beatrix..." Steiner said simply. He was dressed in a tuxedo that fit him surprisingly well considering a merchant had loaned it to him not an hour beforehand. Zidane noticed that he too looked tired, but the relief painted on his face made him feel glad for the knight.

"Steiner!" She gasped quietly. "You made it back safely."

He nodded with a smile Zidane was sure had never seen before. Maybe there was more to the man

that what meets the eye? “May I have this dance?” He asked, just as the band began to play.

“...You know how to dance?” She asked, clearly surprised. In response, he offered her his hand. Never one to be abashed, she took it and the pair strode towards the middle of the room. Seeing that the pair were planning on dancing, people spread out to watch the first pair of dancers.

“This otta be good..” he chuckled as the pair began. Zidane’s amused smile however, was quickly replaced by an agape stare as the large man not only matched Beatrix’s elegant dancing step for step, but also took the lead. The pair was mesmerizing as they spun and moved across the dancefloor. The crowd let out a collective gasp as Beatrix arched backwards, nearly falling to the floor only to be swooped back up with one of Steiner’s muscular arms. She then spun around him ending in a flourishing embrace with both of them nearly out of breath. The room erupted in loud applause and cheering.

“When did you learn to dance like that?” She asked between breaths.

“You said you wanted us to be able to dance at our wedding, so I took dancing lessons every chance

I had.” He replied, looking embarrassed.

“Your did all of that for me?” She asked.

“Of course.” He answered as though it should have been obvious. Without warning, she kissed him deeply on the lips causing the crowd to burst into applause again.

“They’re really something, aren’t they?” A delicate voice whispered to his right barely loud enough for him to hear.

“Yea...” Zidane answered, breaking from his daze. “I honestLy would have never believed that he had—” His train of thought left him entirely as he looked and realized who he was talking to. In what had to be less than a second, less than a heartbeat, the entire room might as well have disappeared. Was his heart still beating? He wasn’t sure he even cared. The only thing in the world that existed was the goddess In the black dress before him.

As much as he had traveled, he was no stranger to beautiful women, but her... this was no mere woman. Even in the cheap clothes they had purchased for her in Dali and sweating from their fast paced travelling, she had had the kind of beauty any amount of makeup could never replicate, but in

that dress... “Wow...” He breathed breathlessly. “Words can’t describe how beautiful you are.”

Locking eyes with him, her face reddened with a blush at the sincerity of his words. “You look quite dashing yourself.” She replied with a smile. “You know... I think this is a slow song...”

Taking the hint, he moved closer to her still feeling as though he was floating somewhere in a trance. Despite this, he placed his hands gently on her sides, slightly above her hips and they began to sway, moving slowly to the music.

’You’ve changed a lot since we first met.. “Garnet spoke barely above a whisper, though somehow even with the band playing she might as well have been speaking directly into his ear.

“You’re one to talk.” He countered playfully.

“Maybe, but if I have then a lot of it is because of you.” She smiled.

“I hope that’s not a bad thing.” He grinned nervously.

She shook her head slowly and bit her lip softly in hesitation. “Do you... do you remember back when you stayed behind at the Lifa Tree?”

‘I... I remember.’ He answered simply, feeling guilty as he remembered how she had looked as they flew away.

“I...” She began, her expression darkening with regret and he could tell what she was about to say had been on her mind for quite some time. Did she still resent him for what had happened? ‘I guess I’ll just say it..’ She steeled herself. “I should have told you not to go... I should have told you that even though the journey was over that I still needed you.”

He could feel her body trembling slightly and see the tears beginning to well up in her eyes as she continued. “I needed you! I should have told you to stay, not because I couldn’t take care of myself or do things on my own, but because I was in love with you!”

Forgetting all about the music and trying to dance with her, and paying no heed to anyone else in the room. He grabbed her gently by her upper arms and stared deeply into her brown eyes at what he felt must have been her soul laid bare to him. Not even the burning of his own tears starting to form mattered anymore. “No. I should have stayed with you. I should have never stayed behind in the first place.”

“Then why did you!?” She shouted as her tears fell. “Was it really that important to go back for the man that killed so many people!?”

Zidane squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head before looking at her again. “No... it wasn’t. I tried to convince myself that Helping him was the reason I did it, but It was just a lie I wanted to believe...”

“Then why...?” she asked desperately, trying to fight back her sobs.

“Because I didn’t think I was good enough for you...” He replied softly.

“...what?” She asked, her expression a mixture of hurt and confusion.

He let out a shaky sigh before deciding that he had come this far and that there was no point in trying to go back now. “There was so many things I wanted to tell you but when it comes down to it, I didn’t because I was afraid of being honest, not just with you but myself too. The truth is I fell in love with you not long after we started traveling together.”

Garnet didn’t reply or interrupt him, but she found herself trying to remember to breathe.

“Not just cause you were incredibly beautiful, but because of the amazing person that you were. I had never cared about my bad habits or how anyone else thought of me, but when I was with you I just want to be a better person and hopefully the kind of man you deserved. I never gave a damn about the fact that you were going to be a queen or about how much money you had. Hell I liked you best when you were covered in dirt and smiling because you beat me at getting to the treasure chest first.”

He paused to catch his breath and pulled her closer towards him, the anger and desperation Garnet had felt moments ago were quickly dropping away and her heart was racing. “I should have never stayed behind or left you alone. I should have told you that I loved you too and I needed you even more than you needed me. But, I can’t change what’s already happened, so will you let me be the man I should have been for you then? Will you let me ask you what I should have asked you a damned long time ago?” He finished, taking a step back from her.

“W-what do you mean?” She asked, feeling positively feverish.

As he knelt down on one knee in front of her, she couldn’t help but cover her mouth in disbelieving

anticipation for what she thought he was about to do. “I know you could probably still do a hell of a lot better than me, and it’s probably selfish of me, but I could never happily picture you with anyone else. I don’t know how long I’ll live, but I do know however long that is, I want to spend as much as possible of it with you and if you’ll have me, I’ll do my best to make sure you never have to feel alone again. Will you let me stay by your side?” From behind his back, he pulled out a beautiful diamond with delicate sapphire inlays. “I bought this back when we were still traveling together, before we made it to memorial together. Because, I thought you deserved the very best, and gods I know I’m late but... will you marry me Dagger?”

Looking up at her, tears were again pouring down her cheeks and she was shaking even worse than she had been a few moments before. It only took a few seconds for her reply, but to Zidane it felt like hours as part of him was sure she’d say no.

“Yes!” She exclaimed through her sobs that she no longer tried to hold back, flinging herself at him and wrapping her arms around his neck. “Gods yes! I thought you’d never ask!” After what felt like both an eternity and only seconds, She broke from embracing him only long enough to instead kiss him

deeply. Neither of them noticed or cared that everyone, including the musicians and the castle staff, had stopped everything just to cheer.

THE END.... For now.

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A/n: I know there's still a ton of loose ends in this story and many things that haven't been explained or resolved. But you will be seeing them all again in the sequel! Til then, I really do hope you enjoyed reading this story. If so, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

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